



Practice Principles Framework



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PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Introduction

Tourism is one of Europe's most important economic sectors, generating employment, supporting regional development, and contributing significantly to local economies. At the same time, tourism is deeply dependent on the quality of the natural, cultural, and social environments in which it operates. The long-term success of tourism businesses therefore relies on the protection and sustainable management of the destinations, communities, and resources that attract visitors in the first place.

Across Europe, tourism SMEs are increasingly facing complex sustainability challenges. Climate change, biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, changing visitor expectations, and evolving regulatory requirements are transforming the way tourism businesses operate. Issues such as rising energy costs, water stress, waste management, overtourism, and environmental degradation are no longer future concerns but current realities that directly affect business performance, competitiveness, and resilience. At the same time, tourism SMEs are uniquely positioned to drive positive change. Through their daily operations, purchasing decisions, visitor interactions, and partnerships with local communities, SMEs can play a significant role in supporting the transition towards a more sustainable tourism ecosystem.

Recognising this opportunity, the FOOTPRINT project has developed the Practice Principles Framework to support tourism SMEs in translating sustainability ambitions into practical action. Rather than presenting sustainability as a collection of isolated initiatives, the framework promotes a structured and integrated approach that embeds environmental, social, cultural, and economic sustainability into business decision-making. The framework is designed to help tourism SMEs identify priority areas for improvement, implement practical sustainability measures, strengthen business resilience, and align their activities with emerging European sustainability priorities and market expectations. It provides a clear pathway from awareness to action, enabling businesses to progressively adopt more sustainable practices according to their size, capacity, and level of maturity. By supporting tourism SMEs to strengthen their sustainability performance, the framework contributes to the broader goal of creating a tourism sector that is environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, economically resilient, and capable of delivering long-term value for destinations, communities, businesses, and visitors alike.

What is the FOOTPRINT Practice Principles Framework

The Practice Principles Framework is a practical guidance resource developed to support tourism SMEs in implementing sustainability principles within their daily operations and long-term business strategies. The framework brings together eight interconnected practice principles that address the key environmental, social, cultural, and economic dimensions of sustainable tourism. Each principle provides an overview of the topic, explains its relevance to tourism SMEs, outlines practical actions that businesses can take, and offers an implementation roadmap to support continuous improvement. Rather than prescribing a single approach, the framework recognises that tourism SMEs operate in

diverse contexts and face different challenges depending on their size, location, resources, and business model. For this reason, the principles are designed to be flexible and scalable, allowing businesses to adopt actions that are appropriate to their individual circumstances.

The framework should be viewed as a practical reference tool that supports decision-making, planning, and implementation. It can be used to identify priorities, guide sustainability improvements, support staff training, strengthen stakeholder engagement, and prepare businesses for sustainability certification schemes or reporting requirements. Together, the eight principles provide a structured foundation for building more sustainable, resilient, and future-oriented tourism businesses.

Who is this Framework For?

The Practice Principles Framework has been developed primarily for tourism SMEs operating across a range of tourism sectors and destinations. It may be particularly relevant for:

- Accommodation providers, including hotels, guesthouses, campsites, and rural tourism businesses.
- Tour operators and travel service providers.
- Cultural and heritage tourism organisations.
- Adventure and outdoor tourism providers.
- Visitor attractions and experience providers.
- Destination management organisations and tourism networks.
- Tourism support organisations, business associations, and chambers of commerce.
- Vocational education and training providers supporting tourism businesses.

The framework can be used by business owners, managers, sustainability coordinators, staff members, and external support organisations seeking to strengthen sustainability practices and support the green transition within the tourism sector. Regardless of the starting point, the framework encourages a process of continuous improvement, enabling organisations to progressively strengthen their sustainability performance over time.

Sustainability Frameworks and Certification Systems

Why Sustainability Frameworks Matter

The transition towards more sustainable tourism requires businesses to balance environmental protection, social responsibility, economic viability, and long-term resilience. While many tourism SMEs recognise the importance of sustainability, identifying where to start and how to measure progress can be challenging. European sustainability frameworks, policy initiatives, and certification systems provide

valuable guidance by helping businesses understand sustainability priorities, identify areas for improvement, implement practical actions, and benchmark their progress against recognised standards. They also support tourism SMEs in responding to evolving customer expectations, accessing new market opportunities, strengthening competitiveness, and preparing for future regulatory developments.

The Practice Principles Framework has been developed in alignment with recognised European sustainability frameworks and tourism certification systems. Together, these resources provide a structured foundation for supporting the green transition within the tourism sector.

European Policy Context

European Green Deal

The [European Green Deal](#) is the European Union's long-term growth strategy aimed at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. It seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve resource efficiency, protect biodiversity, and support a fair and inclusive transition towards a sustainable economy.

For tourism SMEs, the Green Deal highlights the importance of reducing environmental impacts, improving energy and resource efficiency, supporting biodiversity conservation, and strengthening climate resilience. Many of the actions presented throughout this Framework directly contribute to these objectives.

EU Transition Pathway for Tourism

The [EU Transition Pathway for Tourism](#) provides a roadmap to support the green and digital transition of Europe's tourism ecosystem. It encourages tourism stakeholders to improve sustainability management, embrace innovation, strengthen resilience, and enhance collaboration across destinations and value chains.

The Practice Principles Framework supports these ambitions by translating sustainability priorities into practical actions that tourism SMEs can implement within their daily operations and long-term planning processes.

Circular Economy Action Plan

The [Circular Economy Action Plan](#) promotes the efficient use of resources by encouraging businesses to reduce waste, extend product lifecycles, support reuse and recycling, and minimise resource consumption. For tourism SMEs, adopting circular economy principles can reduce operational costs, improve resource efficiency, and minimise environmental impacts. These concepts are particularly relevant to the principles of Environmental Responsibility, Sustainable Resource Management, and Innovation and Green Transition Tools.

EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030

The [EU Biodiversity Strategy](#) aims to protect and restore ecosystems, reverse biodiversity loss, and strengthen nature conservation across Europe. As many tourism destinations depend directly on healthy natural environments, biodiversity protection is a key component of sustainable tourism development.

The principles of Biodiversity and Natural Resources, Climate Action and Resilience, and Environmental Responsibility directly contribute to these objectives.

GreenEntreComp: The European Sustainability Competence Framework

GreenEntreComp is the European sustainability competence framework developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. It provides a common reference framework for the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to support sustainable thinking and action across all sectors. The framework encourages individuals and organisations to develop competences that support sustainable value creation, systems thinking, collaboration, ethical decision-making, and long-term planning. GreenEntreComp is organised around three competence areas:

Ideas & Opportunities

Recognising sustainability challenges and identifying opportunities to create positive environmental, social, and economic impact.

Resources

Mobilising people, knowledge, partnerships, and resources to support sustainable programmes and organisational change.

Into Action

Planning, implementing, evaluating and continuously improving sustainability actions in practice. The eight Practice Principles presented within this Framework support tourism SMEs in applying GreenEntreComp competences within their business operations and sustainability strategies.

Tourism Sustainability Certification Systems

EU Ecolabel

The EU Ecolabel is the official voluntary environmental label of the European Union. It is awarded to tourism accommodation providers and campsites that demonstrate high environmental performance and meet strict sustainability criteria. Key areas assessed include:

- Energy efficiency and renewable energy use
- Water conservation
- Waste prevention and recycling
- Sustainable procurement practices
- Environmental management systems
- Visitor information and awareness

The EU Ecolabel provides tourism businesses with a recognised and credible way to demonstrate their environmental commitment while strengthening customer confidence and market visibility.

EarthCheck

EarthCheck is an internationally recognised sustainability certification and benchmarking programme designed specifically for the travel and tourism sector. It provides a science-based framework that enables tourism businesses and destinations to measure, monitor, and improve their sustainability performance over time. EarthCheck assesses a range of sustainability indicators, including:

- Energy consumption
- Water use
- Waste management
- Carbon emissions
- Biodiversity conservation
- Community engagement
- Social and cultural sustainability

Through benchmarking and independent verification, EarthCheck supports continuous improvement and helps organisations demonstrate accountability, transparency, and long-term commitment to sustainable tourism practices.

How to Use This Framework

The FOOTPRINT Practice Principles Framework is designed as a practical implementation tool that supports tourism SMEs in their transition towards more sustainable, resilient, and future-oriented business models. Rather than presenting sustainability as a series of isolated actions, the framework provides a structured approach that helps businesses embed sustainability into everyday operations, strategic planning, and long-term decision-making.

The framework complements wider sustainability frameworks, policy initiatives, and certification systems. European policies such as the European Green Deal, the EU Transition Pathway for Tourism, the Circular Economy Action Plan, and the EU Biodiversity Strategy establish the direction of travel for the tourism sector. GreenEntreComp identifies the competences needed to support sustainable decision-making and organisational change, while certification systems such as the EU Ecolabel and EarthCheck provide mechanisms for benchmarking performance and demonstrating achievement. Building on these foundations, the Practice Principles Framework translates sustainability priorities into practical actions that tourism SMEs can implement within their own organisations.

The framework is organised around eight interrelated Practice Principles that reflect the key dimensions of sustainable tourism:

- Environmental Responsibility
- Biodiversity and Natural Resources
- Cultural Sustainability
- Sustainable Resource Management
- Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion
- Climate Action and Resilience

- Visitor Education and Engagement
- Innovation and Green Transition Tools

Each principle explores a specific aspect of sustainability and follows a common structure, including:

- A definition of the principle and its relevance to tourism SMEs;
- An explanation of why the principle matters;
- Practical actions that businesses can implement;
- Examples of application across different tourism sectors;
- A roadmap for implementation;
- A summary of key takeaways.

The principles are designed to be flexible and scalable, recognising that tourism SMEs operate in diverse contexts and may be at different stages of their sustainability journey. Businesses are not expected to implement every action immediately. Instead, the framework encourages a step-by-step approach, allowing organisations to prioritise actions according to their needs, resources, and level of maturity. A key feature of the framework is its systemic perspective. Tourism businesses do not operate in isolation, but within interconnected destination ecosystems involving visitors, suppliers, local communities, public authorities, and natural environments. For this reason, the framework encourages SMEs to consider impacts and opportunities not only within their own operations, but also across their wider value chains and stakeholder networks.

The framework also integrates both mitigation and adaptation approaches. While reducing environmental impacts remains essential, tourism businesses must also strengthen their capacity to anticipate, respond to, and recover from environmental, social, and climate-related challenges. This dual focus supports the development of tourism businesses that are not only more sustainable but also more resilient. By providing a coherent structure and practical guidance, the Practice Principles Framework supports tourism SMEs in moving from sustainability awareness to meaningful action, contributing to a tourism sector that is environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, economically resilient, and prepared for the future.



01



PRINCIPLE 1

Environmental Responsibility



Principle 1: Environmental Responsibility



Definition

Environmental responsibility refers to the commitment of tourism SMEs to recognise, manage, and systematically reduce their environmental impacts across all activities and partnerships. In practical terms, this involves managing energy use, water consumption, waste generation, and material use as part of daily operations. It fosters a culture of accountability that informs decision-making and supports continuous improvement. In this context, SMEs take ownership of their environmental footprint as part of their ethical and strategic development, going beyond mere regulatory compliance.

This principle is closely linked to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which refers to the integration of environmental and social considerations into business operations and stakeholder interactions. In this context, environmental responsibility encourages SMEs to move beyond regulatory compliance and adopt a more structured and proactive approach to managing their environmental impacts.

This principle also contributes to long-term business resilience. By integrating environmental considerations early on, SMEs are better equipped to anticipate environmental challenges, respond to evolving market expectations, and align with the broader sustainability transition in the tourism sector. It ensures that environmental impact is not treated as an external by-product of activity, but as an integral element of responsible business practice and value creation for destinations, communities, and future generations. The tourism sector is inherently dependent on the quality of the natural environment, which directly shapes destination attractiveness and the visitor experience. Environmental degradation can therefore undermine competitiveness and threaten the long-term viability of destinations. Integrating environmental responsibility into core decision-making processes and management practices is essential, as it allows SMEs to progressively build internal capacity, avoid costly future adjustments, and position themselves ahead of regulatory, market, and consumer trends.



Importance

Addressing Environmental and Social Challenges

Environmental responsibility is a fundamental principle for tourism SMEs because the tourism sector depends directly on healthy ecosystems, attractive destinations, and the sustainable use of natural resources. It helps businesses recognise and reduce their contribution to resource depletion, pollution, waste generation, and ecosystem degradation, which are often amplified in destinations with high visitor density or fragile natural conditions.

Beyond direct environmental effects, this principle also indirectly contributes to broader sustainability challenges. From a social perspective, poor environmental management can affect the quality of life of

local communities, for example through resource depletion, increased costs, water scarcity, or reduced access to clean and healthy environments. It can also impact cultural landscapes and heritage sites that depend on a well-preserved environment.

Strengthening environmental responsibility helps mitigate these pressures by promoting more efficient and responsible resource use. In this sense, environmental responsibility supports the broader sustainability of destinations, even if its primary focus remains ecological.



Benefits for SMEs

Adopting environmental responsibility brings a range of tangible and strategic benefits for tourism SMEs:

- ✓ **Competitive Advantage:** Environmental responsibility strengthens SMEs' competitiveness by responding to the growing demand from travellers, tour operators, and destination managers for sustainable tourism services. It helps businesses differentiate themselves in a crowded market and align with value-driven consumer expectations, particularly among environmentally conscious visitors.
- ✓ **Cost efficiency and improved operational performance:** By systematically managing environmental impacts (such as energy, water, and waste), SMEs can reduce unnecessary resource consumption and improve operational efficiency. These improvements often translate into direct cost savings and more efficient day-to-day management, which is particularly valuable for small businesses with limited financial margins.
- ✓ **Stronger reputation and reduced risk of greenwashing:** A structured and transparent approach to environmental responsibility enhances credibility and strengthens trust among customers and partners. It also reduces the risk of greenwashing by ensuring that environmental claims are based on consistent practices, evidence, and continuous improvement rather than isolated actions or marketing messages.
- ✓ **Better access to opportunities and long-term resilience:** SMEs that demonstrate environmental responsibility are better positioned to access partnerships, funding programmes, and certification schemes that increasingly include sustainability criteria. This contributes to long-term resilience by helping businesses adapt to changing market expectations, regulatory trends, and the broader sustainability transition in tourism.



Key Actions for SMEs

To implement environmental responsibility, tourism SMEs should focus on the following core areas of action:



1 Understand and Manage Environmental Impacts

Develop a comprehensive understanding of how business activities interact with the environment across the full value chain. This includes direct operational impacts (such as energy use, water consumption, and waste generation), as well as indirect impacts linked to transport, procurement, and customer behaviour. Taking a lifecycle perspective helps identify the most significant pressure points and ensures that environmental considerations are systematically integrated into decision-making, including across suppliers, on-site operations, and customer-related activities.

2 Improve Resource Efficiency

Commit to reducing environmental impacts through concrete and measurable actions across operations. This includes improving energy efficiency (e.g. optimising heating and cooling systems, using energy-efficient lighting and equipment), reducing water consumption (e.g. installing water-saving devices, reusing water where feasible), and minimising waste (e.g. preventing single-use products, improving sorting and recycling practices).

3 Reduce Emissions and Waste

SMEs can also reduce emissions by promoting low-carbon transport options, sourcing locally to limit transport impacts, and favouring environmentally friendly products and materials. Where possible, adopting renewable energy solutions and circular practices (reuse, repair, recycling) further strengthens impact reduction. For example, SMEs can implement LED lighting, install water-saving devices, reduce single-use plastics, and prioritise local and environmentally certified suppliers.

4 Integrate Environmental Responsibility into Core Business Practices

Move beyond isolated initiatives by embedding environmental considerations into all key business functions, such as strategic planning, investment decisions, procurement, and the design of tourism products and services. This ensures consistency and reinforces environmental responsibility as a long-term business priority.

5 Promote Responsible Value Chains

Extend environmental responsibility beyond the organisation by actively engaging with suppliers, service providers, and partners. This involves selecting partners based on environmental criteria, encouraging more sustainable practices, and favouring local and low-impact sourcing where possible. Strengthening the sustainability of the value chain contributes to reducing indirect impacts and enhances the overall credibility of the business.

6 Engage Stakeholders in Environmental Responsibility

Foster a culture of environmental responsibility by actively involving employees, customers, and other stakeholders. This includes building staff awareness and skills, encouraging responsible behaviours among visitors, and communicating commitments and progress in a transparent and consistent manner. Meaningful engagement helps reinforce trust, supports behaviour change, and anchors environmental responsibility within the broader ecosystem of the destination.

@ Application in Tourism Sectors

Ecotourism

In ecotourism, environmental responsibility is a fundamental principle that ensures tourism activities actively contribute to the protection of natural environments rather than simply minimising harm. It involves taking a structured and accountable approach to managing environmental impacts, with a strong emphasis on transparency, monitoring, and continuous improvement. Tourism SMEs can apply this principle by systematically assessing their environmental footprint and aligning their operations with set objectives (e.g., monitor energy and water consumption, set reduction targets, report progress).

Environmental responsibility in ecotourism also extends to partnerships and supply chains. A small tour operator, for instance, may choose to work with local guides and suppliers who follow recognised environmental standards, and may include environmental criteria in their selection process. By doing so, the business takes responsibility not only for its direct activities, but also for the broader impacts of its services.

In addition, this principle can be applied through transparent communication and evidence-based practices. An ecotourism provider may share information with visitors about how environmental impacts are monitored and managed, such as tracking waste reduction or supporting habitat conservation initiatives. This helps build trust and ensures that sustainability claims are credible and grounded in real practices.



Cultural tourism

In cultural tourism, environmental responsibility ensures that tourism activities respect and protect the environmental conditions that support cultural heritage and local identity. It involves a structured and accountable approach to managing environmental impacts linked to visitor flows, infrastructure, and services surrounding cultural sites. Tourism SMEs operating in cultural destinations (such as historic towns, heritage sites, or cultural landscapes) can apply this principle by systematically monitoring and managing the environmental effects of their activities.

Environmental responsibility also applies to how SMEs manage visitor-related impacts. A guided tour company, for instance, may design itineraries that reduce congestion in sensitive areas, coordinate with local stakeholders, and integrate environmental considerations into planning decisions. By doing so, the business takes responsibility for its role in preserving both the environmental quality and the integrity of cultural spaces. Cultural tourism businesses can also support environmental responsibility through sustainable event management, reducing waste at cultural festivals and events, promoting sustainable transport options for visitors, and collaborating with heritage managers to minimise visitor pressures on sensitive cultural sites.



Adventure Tourism

In adventure tourism, environmental responsibility ensures that activities taking place in natural environments are managed in a way that maintains ecosystem integrity and minimises cumulative impacts over time. It involves a structured and accountable approach to assessing, monitoring, and managing the environmental effects of outdoor activities, equipment use, and visitor behaviour.

Tourism SMEs operating in adventure tourism can apply this principle by systematically evaluating the environmental impact of their activities and integrating this information into planning and operations. For example, an outdoor activity provider may monitor the condition of trails or natural sites used for tours, adjust routes or group sizes where needed, and document these decisions as part of an ongoing environmental management approach. Environmental responsibility also applies to how activities are organised and supervised. A rafting or trekking company, for instance, may establish clear environmental guidelines for guides and participants, track compliance, and regularly review practices to reduce impacts such as erosion, disturbance to wildlife, or waste generation. This reflects a proactive and accountable way of managing environmental risks associated with outdoor experiences.

In addition, SMEs can extend responsibility to their equipment and suppliers. For example, an adventure tourism business may select durable, repairable equipment, monitor its use and lifecycle, and work with suppliers that follow environmentally responsible practices. This helps ensure that environmental considerations are integrated beyond the activity itself. Adventure tourism providers can share information with clients about how environmental impacts are managed and encourage responsible behaviour among participants.

Roadmap for Implementation

	Step 1. Assess your environmental baseline	Begin by identifying and analysing the main environmental impacts linked to your activities across the value chain. This includes direct (energy use, waste generation, etc.) and indirect (transport, purchased goods, etc.) impacts. A simple baseline assessment helps identify priority areas for action and provides a reference point for future improvements.
	Step 2. Define priorities and set measurable objectives	Prioritise the most significant environmental impacts and define clear objectives for improvement. These objectives should be realistic, time-bound, and aligned with the SME's capacity (e.g., reducing energy consumption by a defined percentage, decreasing waste sent to landfill, or lowering carbon emissions per customer or per service delivered).
	Step 3. Establish governance and responsibilities	Define internal responsibilities for environmental management, even in small structures (e.g., assigning a person or team responsible for monitoring progress, integrating environmental criteria into decision-making, and ensuring regular follow-up at management level). Strong governance ensures consistency and long-term commitment.
	Step 4. Implement targeted environmental actions	Deploy concrete measures to reduce environmental impacts in priority areas. Actions should be aligned with operational reality and progressively integrated into daily business practices rather than treated as isolated initiatives.
	Step 5. Define and monitor key environmental KPIs	Select a set of relevant indicators to track environmental performance over time, allowing SMEs to measure progress, identify inefficiencies and support evidence-based decisions. Examples of common KPIs include: energy consumption (kWh per guest, per room, or per activity); water consumption (litres per guest-night or service unit); waste generation (kg per customer, recycling rate in %); carbon footprint (kg CO ₂ e per stay, per activity, or per turnover); share of local or sustainable sourcing (% of purchases)
	Step 6. Evaluation Performance and Drive Continuous Improvement	Regularly analyse KPI results to assess progress against objectives. This evaluation can be done annually or seasonally, depending on activity cycles. SMEs can use simple dashboards or structured frameworks (e.g. ISO 14001-inspired approaches or CSR assessment tools) to identify gaps and adjust actions. The goal is continuous improvement rather than immediate perfection.
	Step 7. Communicate Progress Transparently	Share environmental commitments, actions, and performance results with stakeholders in a clear and transparent way, avoiding greenwashing. It strengthens trust with customers and partners.
	Step 8. Pursue Certification and External Recognition	SMEs can engage in recognised environmental labels or certification schemes (e.g., EU Ecolabel, Green Key, ISO14001, EMAS, etc. or CSR labels such as Responsibility Europe) to structure their approach and gain external validation.

This roadmap provides practical guidance for implementing Environmental Responsibility within your organisation. For a broader approach to embedding sustainability across all aspects of your business, see the Sustainability Implementation Journey at the end of this Framework.

Summary

Definition	Environmental responsibility is the commitment of tourism SMEs to systematically manage, monitor, and take accountability for their environmental impacts, embedding sustainability into core business decisions and long-term development.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand and manage environmental impacts• Reduce environmental footprint• Integrate sustainability into business operations• Promote responsible value chains• Engage stakeholders
Related Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biodiversity and Nature Resources• Sustainable Resource Management• Climate Action and Resilience



02



PRINCIPLE 2

Biodiversity and Natural Resources

Principle 2: Biodiversity and Natural Resources

Definition

Biodiversity refers to the variety of life on Earth, including the diversity of species, ecosystems, and genetic resources that support healthy and functioning natural environments (World Health Organisation, 2018). Natural resources are the raw materials and sources of energy occurring in nature without human intervention. Some of these resources are renewable but can take a long time to renew: water, wind, and sunlight. Other resources are non-renewable; they exist in a limited quantity (e.g. fossil fuels, minerals, coal, natural gas). In the context of sustainable tourism, natural resources and biodiversity, such as oceans, forests, and mountains, are often at the heart of destinations and attractions. However, tourism can place significant pressure on these environments. Poorly managed tourism activities may lead to habitat destruction, disturbance of species, pollution, and the overexploitation of natural resources. Therefore, it is essential to minimise the environmental impact of tourism to protect these ecosystems. Protecting biodiversity and natural resources is essential to maintaining the environmental quality and visitor experiences on which many tourism businesses depend.

Tourism contributes to 10% of the European Union's (EU) gross domestic product (GDP). Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represent most tourism businesses in Europe, employing approximately 12.3 million people. (European Parliament, 2025) Companies in tourism are represented in different sectors such as accommodation, transportation, food services and entertainment. For SMEs such as restaurants, accommodation providers, and tour operators, applying sustainability principles means adopting practices that protect biodiversity and natural resources while continuing to generate economic value. These businesses play a key role in shaping tourism's impact, as their choices and practices can either support the conservation of natural environments or contribute to their degradation. Protecting biodiversity and natural resources is therefore not only an environmental responsibility, but also a business necessity for tourism SMEs seeking to maintain the long-term attractiveness and resilience of destinations.

Importance

Addressing Environmental and Social Challenges

Biodiversity and natural resources are often the primary reasons visitors are attracted to a destination. Healthy ecosystems, scenic landscapes, wildlife, forests, mountains, rivers, and coastal environments form the foundation of many tourism experiences. As a result, the tourism sector depends heavily on the quality and resilience of natural environments. However, tourism can place significant pressure on biodiversity and natural resources if activities are not carefully managed. Many travellers are drawn to environmentally sensitive and fragile areas, which can be particularly vulnerable to tourism-related impacts. Poorly managed tourism development may contribute to:

- Waste generation and pollution, placing pressure on local waste management systems and natural environments.
- Overuse of natural resources, including increased energy and water consumption associated with transport, accommodation, and tourism facilities.
- Habitat disturbance and ecosystem degradation resulting from infrastructure development such as hotels, roads, marinas, and recreational facilities.
- Disturbance to wildlife and natural habitats through increased visitor activity and poorly managed tourism experiences.

Tourism can therefore be viewed as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can generate economic benefits that support conservation efforts, create incentives for environmental protection, and raise awareness of the value of biodiversity. For example, tourism revenues can contribute to the management of protected areas, conservation initiatives, and environmental education programmes. On the other hand, poorly managed tourism development can contribute to ecosystem degradation, pollution, over-tourism, and the overexploitation of natural resources. Research suggests that increasing tourism activity can place additional pressure on biodiversity through habitat disturbance and increased resource consumption. However, these impacts can be significantly reduced through appropriate planning, effective management, and responsible tourism practices.

Beyond environmental impacts, biodiversity loss and resource depletion can also affect local communities. Degraded ecosystems may reduce access to natural resources, place additional pressure on local infrastructure, and create tensions between tourism development and community needs. Protecting biodiversity and natural resources is therefore essential not only for environmental sustainability, but also for supporting community wellbeing and the long-term resilience of tourism destinations.



Benefits for SMEs

Adopting conservation practices offers several benefits for tourism SMEs:

- ✓ **Competitive Advantage:** Travellers are increasingly seeking tourism experiences that align with their environmental values and support responsible tourism practices. Businesses that demonstrate a commitment to biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management can strengthen their market positioning, differentiate themselves from competitors, and appeal to environmentally conscious visitors.
- ✓ **New Business Opportunities:** The conservation of biodiversity and natural resources can create new opportunities for tourism businesses. SMEs may develop biodiversity-themed experiences, nature-based tourism products, wildlife observation activities, educational tours, or partnerships with conservation organisations. These activities can diversify tourism offerings while creating additional sources of revenue.
- ✓ **Reputation and Brand Image:** Implementing biodiversity-friendly practices can enhance an SME's reputation and strengthen customer trust. Visible commitments to protecting local ecosystems and natural resources provide valuable content for communication and marketing activities, helping businesses demonstrate authenticity and attract visitors who value sustainability.
- ✓ **Long-Term Destination Resilience:** Protecting biodiversity and natural resources helps maintain the environmental quality that attracts visitors in the first place. By supporting ecosystem

conservation and reducing environmental pressures, tourism SMEs contribute to the long-term resilience and attractiveness of destinations, helping to secure future business opportunities and reduce risks associated with environmental degradation.

Key Actions for SMEs

What can your business do in practice? Here are some simple actions you can start implementing today:

1 Educate Tourists about Local Biodiversity and Natural Resources

SMEs often have strong knowledge of their local area and its natural environment. By sharing information about local biodiversity, natural resources, and responsible tourism practices, they can help visitors feel more connected to the destination. When tourists better understand the local environment, they are more likely to behave in a respectful and responsible way. This information can be shared through practical approaches. For example, accommodation providers can offer brochures highlighting local ecosystems, wildlife, and simple ways to protect them. Guided tours are also an effective way to educate visitors, as they allow for more in-depth explanations and interaction. In addition, businesses can promote other sustainable activities and recommend environmentally responsible partners within the local area.

2 Design and Deliver Biodiversity-Friendly Tourism Activities

Businesses should ensure that the tourism activities they offer and promote do not damage ecosystems or contribute to the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Tourism activities can place pressure on natural environments if they are poorly designed or managed. SMEs therefore need to evaluate the environmental impacts of the activities they provide and prioritise those that minimise harm to biodiversity and natural landscapes. This involves identifying whether activities take place in sensitive areas such as protected areas or coastal zones. If risks are identified, businesses should modify the activity or select alternative locations that are less environmentally sensitive. In addition, businesses should work with responsible suppliers and partners who follow environmental standards and conservation principles. Tour operators, guides, and accommodation providers can collaborate with protected area authorities, conservation organisations, and local communities to ensure that tourism activities align with biodiversity conservation.

3 Improve Resource Efficiency and Reduce Environmental Footprint

Efficient use of natural resources is essential for reducing pressure on ecosystems. Tourism SMEs can implement measures to reduce water consumption, energy use, and material waste within their activities and units. Water conservation can be achieved through installing low-flow showers and taps, collecting rainwater for irrigation, and encouraging guests to reuse towels and linens. Energy efficiency measures may include using energy-efficient lighting, installing smart heating systems, improving building insulation, and adopting renewable energy sources such as solar panels. Reducing waste is another important way to reduce the environmental footprint. SMEs can minimise single-use plastics, provide recycling bins and try to avoid food waste. By improving resource efficiency, tourism businesses can lower operational costs while also reducing their environmental footprint.

Application in Tourism Sectors

This principle can be applied across different tourism sectors, with each sector offering unique opportunities to support biodiversity and natural resource conservation.

Ecotourism

According to the United Nations (UN), ecotourism refers to nature-based tourism focused on the observation and appreciation of natural environments and local cultures, while minimising environmental impact and supporting conservation efforts. It also includes educational and interpretative elements and is often delivered by small, locally owned businesses. Given this focus, biodiversity and natural resource conservation are central to ecotourism. SMEs operating in this sector are typically already aware of the need to minimise environmental impact and actively integrate sustainability into their business strategies and activities.

Cultural tourism

According to the UN, cultural tourism involves activities where visitors seek to learn, discover, and experience the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of a destination, including traditions, heritage, arts, and ways of life. Cultural heritage is often closely linked to natural environments and traditional knowledge of resource management. Many cultural sites are located in areas shaped by local ecosystems. Tourism SMEs can support biodiversity by promoting locally produced food, handicrafts, and sustainable products that rely on responsibly managed natural resources. By supporting local producers and traditional knowledge, businesses contribute to the preservation of both cultural heritage and biodiversity. Cultural tourism businesses can also encourage visitors to explore cultural landscapes responsibly, helping to preserve both local heritage and the natural environments that support it.

Adventure tourism

Adventure tourism typically takes place in natural landscapes and involves physical activities such as hiking, climbing, rafting, or diving. It often combines physical challenge with interaction and engagement with nature. Because these activities occur directly within natural environments, they offer strong opportunities to promote responsible behaviour. SMEs play an important role in educating visitors about protecting biodiversity and natural resources. In practice, this can include encouraging visitors to respect wildlife (e.g. not feeding animals), stay on designated trails to prevent erosion, and avoid littering. Through these actions, businesses help ensure that natural environments can be enjoyed sustainably by future generations.

Roadmap for Implementation

Step 1: Assess Biodiversity and Resource Impacts

Review your current operations to identify how your business may affect local biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural resources. Consider direct impacts (e.g. water use, waste generation, visitor activities) and indirect impacts (e.g. supply chains, transport, procurement). Identify key areas for improvement and establish a baseline for future action.

 Step 2: Set Biodiversity and Resource Conservation Goals	Define realistic and measurable objectives aligned with your business activities. Examples may include reducing water consumption, eliminating single-use plastics, sourcing more sustainable products, supporting local conservation initiatives, or increasing biodiversity awareness among visitors.
 Step 3: Adapt Operations and Tourism Services	Integrate biodiversity considerations into daily operations and tourism experiences. This may involve reducing resource consumption, selecting sustainable suppliers, redesigning activities to minimise environmental disturbance, or introducing biodiversity-friendly practices across facilities and services.
 Step 4: Educate and Engage Visitors	Provide visitors with information about local ecosystems, wildlife, and responsible behaviour. Encourage practices such as staying on designated trails, reducing waste, respecting wildlife, and supporting local conservation efforts.
 Step 5: Train Staff and Collaborate with Stakeholders	Build staff awareness of biodiversity and natural resource management. Work with suppliers, conservation organisations, protected area managers, local communities, and other stakeholders to strengthen biodiversity protection efforts and share good practice.
 Step 6: Monitor Progress and Measure Impact	Track progress using simple indicators such as water and energy consumption, waste generation, visitor participation in environmental initiatives, biodiversity-related activities offered, or partnerships established with conservation organisations. Regular monitoring helps identify successes and areas for improvement.
 Step 7: Communicate and Continuously Improve	Share your actions and achievements with visitors, partners, and local communities through websites, social media, sustainability statements, or on-site communication. Use feedback and monitoring results to refine your approach and identify new opportunities to support biodiversity conservation.

This roadmap provides practical guidance for implementing Biodiversity and Natural Resources within your organisation. For a broader approach to embedding sustainability across all aspects of your business, see the Sustainability Implementation Journey at the end of this Framework.

Summary

Definition	<i>Biodiversity and Natural Resources refers to the protection, responsible management, and sustainable use of ecosystems, species, and natural resources that support tourism destinations and local communities</i>
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate visitors about local biodiversity and natural resources • Design and deliver biodiversity-friendly tourism activities • Improve resource efficiency and reduce environmental footprint
Related Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Responsibility • Sustainable Resource Management • Climate Action and Resilience



03



PRINCIPLE 3

Cultural Sustainability

Principle 3: Cultural Sustainability

Definition

Cultural sustainability in tourism refers to the protection, preservation, and meaningful integration of cultural heritage, identities, traditions, and creative expressions within tourism development and experiences. It ensures that tourism activities respect the cultural integrity of destinations, contribute to the safeguarding of both tangible and intangible heritage, and support the continuity of cultural practices across generations. In the context of tourism SMEs, cultural sustainability implies recognising culture not merely as a resource to be consumed, but as a living and evolving dimension of communities that requires respect, collaboration, and responsible management. It involves working with local stakeholders to ensure that cultural elements are represented accurately, interpreted respectfully, and shared in ways that generate value for the communities that hold them.

This principle also emphasises avoiding cultural commodification, simplification, or misrepresentation. Tourism experiences should not reduce culture to stereotypical or commercialised narratives, but instead reflect its diversity, complexity, and contemporary relevance. Cultural sustainability therefore requires a balance between accessibility for visitors and authenticity for local communities. Applying this principle means that tourism SMEs contribute to maintaining cultural diversity, strengthening local identity, and ensuring that tourism becomes a driver of cultural continuity rather than erosion. In doing so, businesses help create authentic visitor experiences while supporting the long-term vitality of local communities.

Importance

Cultural sustainability is a fundamental pillar of sustainable tourism, as it addresses the relationship between tourism development and the preservation of cultural identity, heritage, and community wellbeing. Across Europe, tourism is closely linked to cultural assets such as historic sites, traditions, gastronomy, languages, and creative industries, all of which contribute significantly to regional identity and destination attractiveness. However, tourism can also generate pressures on cultural systems if it is not managed responsibly. These pressures may include the overuse of heritage sites, the loss of authenticity through commercialisation, the displacement of local practices, and the transformation of living cultures into simplified or staged representations designed primarily for visitors. In some cases, tourism can contribute to the erosion of local identity, particularly when external narratives and commercial interests dominate over local voices and community priorities.

Cultural sustainability seeks to address these challenges by ensuring that tourism respects, protects, and celebrates the cultural characteristics that make destinations unique. This requires active collaboration with local communities, cultural organisations, artists, artisans, heritage professionals, and other stakeholders to ensure that cultural elements are represented accurately, interpreted respectfully, and shared in ways that generate value for local people. When managed responsibly, tourism can play a positive role in supporting cultural sustainability by:

- Revitalising traditional practices and crafts;

- Supporting cultural transmission between generations;
- Creating economic opportunities linked to cultural production;
- Increasing awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity;
- strengthening community pride and identity.



Benefits for SMEs

Integrating cultural sustainability into tourism operations offers several benefits for SMEs:

- ✓ **Differentiation and Competitiveness:** Authentic, place-based experiences are increasingly valued by visitors seeking meaningful and immersive travel experiences. By showcasing local culture in a respectful and engaging way, SMEs can differentiate themselves from competitors and strengthen their market positioning.
- ✓ **Stronger Connections with Local Communities:** Meaningful engagement with local communities, cultural organisations, and heritage stakeholders helps build trust, strengthen partnerships, and create opportunities for collaboration. These relationships can enhance the quality and authenticity of tourism experiences while supporting local development.
- ✓ **Destination Resilience and Long-Term Attractiveness:** Protecting cultural assets helps maintain the unique character and identity of destinations. By contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and traditions, SMEs support the long-term attractiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the places in which they operate.
- ✓ **Alignment with Emerging Market and Policy Trends:** Responsible cultural tourism is increasingly recognised and promoted at European and international levels. SMEs that integrate cultural sustainability into their operations are better positioned to respond to evolving visitor expectations, access funding opportunities, develop strategic partnerships, and align with wider sustainability priorities.



Key Actions for SMEs

1 Integrate Local Cultural Heritage Into Tourism Products and Services

SMEs should design experiences that reflect the specific cultural characteristics of the destination, including traditions, history, gastronomy, language, and creative expressions. This requires moving beyond generic offers and incorporating elements that are unique to the place. In practice, this may involve developing guided experiences based on local narratives, incorporating traditional recipes into hospitality services, or showcasing local crafts and artistic practices. Collaboration with local experts and cultural actors is essential to ensure authenticity.

2 Collaborate with Local Cultural Stakeholders and Communities

Tourism businesses should actively engage with local communities, cultural organisations, artists, artisans, and heritage professionals in the design and delivery of tourism experiences. This collaboration ensures that cultural representation is accurate and respectful, while also enabling local stakeholders to benefit economically and socially from tourism. It may include co-creation of products, joint events, or long-term partnerships.

3 Support and Promote Local Cultural Production

SMEs should prioritise the use and promotion of locally produced goods and services, including food, crafts, artistic products, and cultural activities. This not only supports local economies but also contributes to the preservation of traditional knowledge and production methods. For example, offering locally sourced products or working with local producers strengthens the link between tourism and cultural sustainability.

4 Provide Accurate, Contextualised and Respectful Interpretation

Visitors should receive information that helps them understand the cultural significance of the destination. This includes providing context, avoiding stereotypes, and explaining appropriate behaviour. Interpretation can take the form of guided tours, informational materials, storytelling, or digital tools. The aim is to foster understanding and respect rather than superficial consumption.

5 Ensure Ethical Representation and Avoid Cultural Commodification

SMEs should critically assess how cultural elements are presented and ensure that they are not exploited, distorted, or reduced to purely commercial products.

This involves respecting cultural sensitivities, recognising community ownership of traditions, and avoiding practices that may be perceived as inappropriate or extractive.

Application in Tourism Sectors

Ecotourism

In ecotourism, cultural sustainability is closely linked to the relationship between communities and their natural environment. Tourism SMEs operating in rural or protected areas can integrate traditional ecological knowledge into visitor experiences, helping guests understand how local communities have historically interacted with and managed natural resources. This may involve collaborating with residents to explain traditional land-use practices such as agriculture, forestry, or pastoralism, or offering workshops that showcase traditional skills such as herbal medicine, food preservation, or craftsmanship. For example, an eco-lodge may organise visits with local farmers or shepherds, allowing visitors to gain insight into how cultural practices have shaped the surrounding landscape and continue to contribute to its stewardship today.

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism directly relies on heritage, traditions, and local identity, making cultural sustainability particularly important. Tourism SMEs can support this principle by working closely with local historians, cultural organisations, artists, and community members to ensure that tourism experiences reflect authentic local perspectives. This may involve co-creating tour content, incorporating diverse voices into storytelling, and ensuring that visitor activities respect the daily lives of local residents. For example, a guided tour developed in partnership with community members can help visitors understand both the historical significance of a place and its contemporary cultural relevance, creating a richer and more meaningful experience.



Adventure Tourism

In adventure tourism, cultural sustainability can enhance visitor experiences by strengthening connections between physical activities and the places in which they occur. Tourism SMEs can incorporate local stories, traditions, and cultural landmarks into hiking, cycling, rafting, or other adventure-based experiences, helping visitors develop a deeper appreciation of the destination. Businesses may also collaborate with local communities for accommodation, catering, or guiding services, ensuring that tourism generates benefits locally while supporting cultural continuity. For example, a mountain tourism provider may include visits to local villages as part of a trekking experience, allowing visitors to engage with residents and learn about local customs and traditions alongside the outdoor activity.



Roadmap for Implementation

Step 1: Identify Cultural Assets	Map tangible and intangible cultural resources relevant to your tourism activities, including heritage sites, traditions, crafts, gastronomy, languages, and local stories.
Step 2: Engage Communities and Cultural Stakeholders	Consult local communities, cultural organisations, artists, artisans, and heritage experts to ensure accurate and respectful representation.
Step 3: Integrate Culture into Tourism Experiences	Develop products and services that authentically incorporate local cultural elements and reflect the unique identity of the destination.
Step 4: Educate Staff and Visitors	Develop products and services that authentically incorporate local cultural elements and reflect the unique identity of the destination.
Step 5: Support Local Cultural Production	Prioritise local suppliers, producers, artists, and cultural practitioners wherever possible to strengthen local cultural ecosystems.
Step 6: Monitor and Improve	Collect feedback from visitors, communities, and cultural stakeholders to evaluate authenticity, visitor satisfaction, and community benefits. Use findings to continuously improve your approach.



Summary

Definition	Preservation, promotion, and respectful integration of cultural heritage and identity within tourism activities.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate local culture into tourism experiences. • Collaborate with local communities. • Provide respectful and accurate cultural information to visitors.
Related Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion • Visitor Education and Engagement • Biodiversity and Natural Resources



04

PRINCIPLE 4

Sustainable Resource Management

Principle 4: Sustainable Resource Management

Definition

Sustainable resource management refers to the responsible use of natural resources in a way that meets current needs while preserving resources for future generations (United Nations). International frameworks such as the [United Nations Framework Classification for Resources \(UNFC\)](#) and the [United Nations Resource Management System \(UNRMS\)](#) promote the sustainable and efficient management of natural resources across sectors.

Within the tourism sector, this involves balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social responsibility by ensuring that tourism activities use resources efficiently and minimise negative impacts on destinations and local communities. For tourism SMEs, sustainable resource management focuses on reducing the consumption of energy, water, and materials, while minimising waste and pollution. It encourages businesses to improve operational efficiency, adopt more sustainable practices, and make better use of available resources without compromising the quality of visitor experiences.

To be effective, sustainable resource management should be integrated into both business strategies and daily operations. By doing so, tourism SMEs can reduce costs, strengthen resilience, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the destinations on which they depend.

Importance

Addressing Environmental, Social and Economic Challenges

Sustainable resource management is a key principle for addressing many of the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the tourism sector today. Tourism activities often require significant amounts of energy, water, materials, and infrastructure, placing pressure on local resources and ecosystems if they are not managed responsibly.

From an environmental perspective, tourism can increase the demand for natural resources and contribute to waste generation, pollution, and ecosystem degradation. Examples include the high consumption of water for swimming pools, landscaping, and accommodation facilities in areas already experiencing water scarcity, as well as the significant energy requirements associated with transport, hospitality services, and tourism infrastructure. If unmanaged, these pressures can contribute to resource depletion and long-term environmental damage.

Resource consumption can also create social and cultural challenges. In destinations where resources are limited, increased demand from tourism may place additional pressure on local communities and contribute to rising costs. Poor resource management can also negatively affect cultural and heritage assets through pollution, overcrowding, and environmental degradation, reducing the quality and attractiveness of destinations over time. By improving the efficiency with which resources are used,

tourism SMEs can help reduce these pressures while contributing to the protection of natural and cultural assets. Sustainable resource management therefore plays an important role in supporting both destination sustainability and long-term business resilience.

Benefits for SMEs

Integrating sustainable resource management into business operations offers several benefits for tourism SMEs.

- ✓ **Cost Savings:** Reducing energy, water, and material consumption can significantly lower operational costs. While some measures may require initial investment, such as improving insulation, installing renewable energy systems, or upgrading equipment, these improvements often generate substantial long-term savings.
- ✓ **Improved Operational Efficiency:** Efficient use of resources helps businesses streamline operations, reduce waste, and improve overall performance. This can lead to better resource planning, lower maintenance costs, and more effective day-to-day management.
- ✓ **Competitive Advantage:** Sustainability is becoming an increasingly important factor in visitor decision-making. Tourism businesses that implement and promote sustainable resource management practices can strengthen their reputation, attract environmentally conscious travellers, and differentiate themselves from competitors.
- ✓ **Increased Business Resilience:** Reducing dependence on scarce or expensive resources helps businesses adapt to rising costs, regulatory changes, and future resource constraints. This strengthens long-term resilience and supports sustainable business growth.

Key Actions for SMEs

What can your business do in practice? Here are some simple actions you can start implementing today:

1 Improve Energy Efficiency and Transition to Renewable Energy

The first step for SMEs is to assess their current energy consumption and identify areas where efficiency can be improved. Upgrades can be implemented at different levels, such as improving insulation (e.g. replacing windows), upgrading lighting systems (e.g. installing LED lighting or motion sensors), and optimising heating systems (e.g. heat pumps, programmable or smart thermostats). Where possible, SMEs should transition to renewable energy sources, such as solar panels, to reduce carbon emissions and long-term energy costs.

2 Reduce Water Consumption and Improve Water Management

Water is a critical resource in tourism, particularly in the hospitality sector. SMEs can reduce water consumption by installing low-flow taps and showers, and by using simple visual cues (e.g. colour-changing taps or signage) to encourage more responsible use among guests. Additional measures may include reusing rainwater for irrigation or landscaping. Regular maintenance is also essential to prevent leaks and ensure efficient water use.

3 Improve Waste Management (Circular Practices)

Waste management is a key challenge in tourism. SMEs should aim to reduce waste at the source by avoiding single-use products, especially plastics, and opting for reusable alternatives. Implementing clear

recycling systems for both guests and staff is essential. Composting organic waste, particularly in food-related services, can significantly reduce overall waste. SMEs can also adopt circular practices by reusing materials, repairing equipment, and working with suppliers who minimise packaging.

4 Source Products Responsibly

Responsible sourcing is an important part of sustainable resource management. SMEs should prioritise local, seasonal, and sustainably produced goods, which helps reduce transport emissions and supports local economies. Choosing certified or eco-labelled products can ensure that goods meet environmental standards. In addition, managing inventory efficiently and avoiding over-purchasing can help reduce waste and unnecessary resource use.

Application in Tourism Sectors

Sustainable resource management can be applied across different tourism sectors, with each sector presenting specific challenges and opportunities depending on how it interacts with natural and cultural resources.

Ecotourism:

Sustainable resource management is a core principle of ecotourism. Ecotourism aims to minimise environmental impacts while contributing to the conservation of natural areas and the wellbeing of local communities. According to the study, *Ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy: Exploring the role of natural resource management* (2024), well-managed ecotourism initiatives can contribute directly to the sustainable development of natural resources by supporting conservation efforts, generating economic benefits, and increasing environmental awareness among visitors and local communities (Tilavova et. al).

One of the key findings of the study is the importance of local community involvement in the planning, development, and management of tourism activities. Engaging local communities helps ensure that resource management strategies are appropriate to the local context while creating social and economic benefits. The study also highlights the value of adaptive management approaches, encouraging tourism SMEs to regularly monitor environmental impacts and adjust their practices where necessary. For example, businesses may limit visitor numbers in sensitive areas, modify activities during certain seasons to protect wildlife, or implement measures to reduce resource consumption and waste.

Cultural tourism:

In cultural tourism, sustainable resource management focuses on preserving cultural heritage while ensuring that tourism activities do not overwhelm local communities or damage historical assets. Resources in this context include physical sites such as monuments and museums, but also intangible heritage such as traditions, languages, and local knowledge. One of the main challenges in cultural tourism is managing visitor numbers to prevent overcrowding and over-tourism. High tourist volumes can lead to physical damage to heritage sites, increased waste and pollution, and disruption to local life. As for ecotourism, SMEs can address this by implementing visitor management strategies (e.g., promoting off-season travel).



Adventure tourism:

Adventure tourism often takes place in remote or fragile natural environments, such as mountains, forests, rivers, or coastal areas. These locations can be particularly vulnerable to environmental damage, and resource management can be more challenging due to limited infrastructure and access. SMEs in this sector must adopt resource management practices to minimise their environmental footprint. Waste management is essential: businesses should implement “leave no trace” principles, ensuring that all waste is reduced as much as possible and removed from nature. This includes, for example, minimising packaging and using reusable equipment.

Additionally, SMEs must carefully manage the intensity and scale of activities to avoid overuse of natural areas. Once again, this may involve limiting and regulating group sizes over the season or avoiding sensitive ecosystems altogether. By doing so, they help preserve the natural resources that their businesses depend on, ensuring long-term sustainability.



Roadmap for Implementation

	Step 1: Assess Current Resource Use	Review how your business currently uses energy, water, materials, and other key resources. Identify areas of high consumption, inefficiencies, and opportunities for improvement.
	Step 2: Set Clear and Achievable Goals	Establish realistic sustainability objectives, such as reducing water consumption, improving energy efficiency, minimising waste, or increasing the use of sustainable products and services.
	Step 3: Improve Operational Efficiency	Implement practical measures to optimise daily operations. This may include upgrading equipment, improving insulation, reducing unnecessary consumption, and introducing more efficient processes.
	Step 4: Adopt Sustainable Resources and Circular Practices	Where possible, transition to renewable energy, eco-labelled products, reusable materials, and locally sourced goods. Explore opportunities to reduce waste through reuse, repair, recycling, and other circular practices.
	Step 5: Train Staff and Engage Stakeholders	Ensure that staff understand sustainability practices and their role in implementing them. Engage suppliers, partners, and local stakeholders to support resource-efficient and sustainable operations.
	Step 6: Monitor Performance and Measure Progress	Track progress using indicators such as energy consumption, water use, waste generation, recycling rates, or procurement practices. Use the results to identify successes and areas for further improvement.
	Step 7: Communicate Progress and Encourage Participation	Share sustainability actions and achievements with visitors, staff, suppliers, and local communities through websites, social media, sustainability statements, or on-site communication. Encourage others to participate in and support your sustainability efforts.





Summary

Definition	Sustainable resource management involves using energy, water, materials, and other resources efficiently to meet current needs while preserving resources for future generations.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve energy efficiency and transition to renewable energy• Reduce water consumption and improve water management• Improve waste management and adopt circular practices• Source products responsibly
Linked Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Environmental Responsibility• Biodiversity and Natural Resources• Climate Action and Resilience



05



PRINCIPLE 5

Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion

Principle 5: Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion

Definition

Community empowerment and social inclusion in tourism refer to the active participation, fair representation, and meaningful benefit of local communities and underrepresented groups in tourism planning, delivery, employment, and decision-making. In the context of sustainable tourism, this principle means that tourism should not be developed only for places and people, but also with them. For tourism SMEs, this principle involves recognising that tourism activity has social consequences as well as economic and environmental ones. A socially inclusive tourism business seeks to reduce barriers to participation, create decent and fair opportunities, value local knowledge, and ensure that local people are not treated merely as service providers or background scenery for the visitor experience. Instead, they are recognised as rightsholders, partners, knowledge holders, workers, entrepreneurs, and co-creators of tourism value.

Community empowerment goes beyond consultation. It means enabling local people to influence decisions that affect them, to participate in tourism-related opportunities on fair terms, and to strengthen their own capacities, confidence, and agency through tourism. Social inclusion means ensuring that tourism is accessible and beneficial for people who are often excluded or marginalised, such as women, young people, older people, people with disabilities, migrants, ethnic minorities, low-income groups, seasonal workers, or residents of remote rural areas. In practical terms, a tourism SME applying this principle will ask questions such as: Who benefits from our business? Who is left out? Are local people involved in shaping the visitor offer? Are recruitment, working conditions, and partnerships fair and inclusive? Are our services accessible to different visitors and local participants? Are we contributing to local social value, or only extracting value from the destination?

Community empowerment and social inclusion are therefore essential to a tourism model that is fair, place-based, participatory, and resilient. They help SMEs create tourism experiences that are not only attractive to visitors but also legitimate, trusted, and beneficial for the communities in which they operate.

Importance

Addressing Social and Community Challenges

This principle is important because tourism can either strengthen communities or deepen existing inequalities. In many destinations, tourism creates jobs, generates income, and brings visibility to local places. However, if poorly managed, it can also exclude residents from decision-making, concentrate profits in a few hands, increase pressure on housing and services, reinforce stereotypes, create low-paid or insecure employment, and reduce community control over local development.

From a sustainability perspective, tourism cannot be considered truly sustainable if its social benefits are weak, unequal, or externally captured. A destination may look environmentally attractive and economically active, yet still be socially fragile if residents feel excluded, if local workers are poorly treated, or if tourism development undermines community cohesion. For this reason, the social dimension of tourism is as important as the environmental one.

For SMEs, community empowerment and social inclusion are not only ethical responsibilities; they are also practical business considerations. Tourism businesses depend on the quality, stability, and attractiveness of the places where they operate. If residents feel that tourism is unfair, extractive, or disruptive, social tensions may increase, and destination reputation may suffer. By contrast, when communities feel involved and respected, businesses are more likely to gain trust, local support, stronger partnerships, and a more resilient operating environment.



Benefits for SMEs

Integrating community empowerment and social inclusion into tourism operations offers several benefits for SMEs.

- ✓ **Improved Business Legitimacy and Local Trust:** Businesses that work transparently with local communities are more likely to build long-term credibility, trust, and positive relationships. This can reduce conflict, strengthen local support, and create a more stable operating environment.
- ✓ **Better Quality and More Distinctive Visitor Experiences:** When tourism experiences are informed by local people, they tend to be more authentic, relevant, and rooted in place. This can improve visitor satisfaction while helping businesses differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market.
- ✓ **Access to Local Knowledge and Talent:** Inclusive businesses are better positioned to identify community needs, hidden assets, local suppliers, and skilled people who may otherwise be overlooked. This can strengthen innovation, improve service quality, and create new opportunities for collaboration.
- ✓ **Greater Staff Loyalty and Stronger Workplace Culture:** Fair employment practices, inclusive recruitment, and respectful working conditions can improve staff retention, motivation, and overall workplace wellbeing. This contributes to stronger organisational performance and better visitor experiences.
- ✓ **Alignment with Emerging Market and Policy Expectations:** Across Europe, responsible tourism is increasingly linked to social value, accessibility, fairness, and community participation. SMEs that embed these principles early are better positioned to respond to evolving visitor expectations, funding opportunities, partnerships, and sustainability priorities.

Community empowerment and social inclusion matter because tourism should contribute to destinations that are not only visited but also lived in well. A tourism SME that ignores the social dimension may achieve short-term gains but weaken the long-term foundations of the destination. A tourism SME that supports empowerment and inclusion helps create places that are more equitable, more resilient, and more capable of sustaining tourism over time.

Key Actions for SMEs

1 Involve Local Communities in The Design And Review of Tourism Experiences

SMEs should create regular opportunities for residents, community groups, cultural associations, and local suppliers to contribute ideas and feedback. This should happen early, not only after products have already been designed. In practice, this may include holding seasonal community meetings, setting up advisory groups, consulting neighbourhood associations, or working directly with local schools, cooperatives, women's groups, youth organisations, or disability organisations. The aim is to identify community priorities, local sensitivities, overlooked assets, and potential risks.

This action helps SMEs move from a purely market-driven model to a more place-responsive one. It also improves the quality of tourism products by grounding them in local realities rather than external assumptions.

2 Apply Inclusive and Fair Employment Practices

SMEs should ensure that recruitment, working conditions, progression opportunities, and workplace culture are fair and inclusive. This means looking beyond legal minimums and asking whether the business is genuinely accessible and welcoming to a wider range of workers. Examples include writing job descriptions in clear language, offering flexible schedules where possible, ensuring equal pay for equal work, making recruitment channels accessible to local people, adapting workplaces for people with disabilities, and providing mentoring or training for staff with limited prior tourism experience.

This action is especially important in tourism, where seasonal work, low wages, informal labour, and unequal opportunities can be common. SMEs that improve fairness in employment contribute directly to social sustainability.

3 Build Partnerships that Create Shared Local Value

SMEs should prioritise partnerships with local businesses, social enterprises, associations, cooperatives, producers, guides, artists, and service providers whose work contributes to the destination's social fabric. This may involve sourcing from local suppliers, co-hosting events with community organisations, supporting local festivals, developing joint offers with social enterprises, or working with NGOs that support inclusion and employment. The goal is not only to "buy local", but to generate mutually beneficial relationships that strengthen the wider destination economy and community life. Strong partnerships also help SMEs access new knowledge, improve credibility, and distribute tourism benefits more fairly.

4 Improve Accessibility and Inclusion In Visitor Services

Social inclusion also applies to the visitor experience. SMEs should review whether their services are physically, economically, digitally, and socially accessible to different groups. This may include improving step-free access, offering information in easy-to-read formats, training staff on inclusive communication, considering sensory needs, providing transparent pricing, offering shorter or lower-cost participation options, and ensuring that marketing images and language do not exclude certain audiences.

Inclusive design benefits not only specific groups but also the overall quality and usability of services.

5 Monitor Who Benefits From Tourism Activity

SMEs should track whether the benefits of tourism are reaching local people and diverse groups. Without some form of monitoring, good intentions can remain superficial. Useful indicators may include the proportion of local employees, local supplier spend, number of community partnerships, staff diversity, accessibility improvements implemented, repeat collaboration with local organisations, or community feedback received and acted upon. Monitoring helps SMEs identify gaps, demonstrate progress, and improve accountability.

Application in Tourism Sectors

Ecotourism

In ecotourism, community empowerment and social inclusion should be reflected in how nature-based experiences are planned, staffed, and managed. Tourism SMEs should actively involve local communities in the design and delivery of tourism activities, ensuring that residents benefit from employment opportunities, skills development, and tourism-related income. This may involve working with local farmers, environmental organisations, craftspeople, or community groups to develop experiences that reflect local knowledge and priorities. For example, a birdwatching business operating in a wetland area could train local young adults as assistant guides, source products from nearby producers, and consult residents on visitor management practices. Such approaches help create tourism experiences that are both environmentally and socially sustainable while strengthening community ownership and support.

Cultural Tourism

In cultural tourism, community empowerment and social inclusion are particularly important because tourism often relies on local identity, heritage, traditions, and lived experiences. Tourism SMEs should ensure that local people have a meaningful role in shaping how their stories, culture, and heritage are presented to visitors. This may involve collaborating with residents, community historians, artists, performers, and cultural organisations to develop authentic and respectful tourism experiences. For example, a tourism business operating in a former industrial district could co-design heritage tours with former workers, local associations, and migrant communities that helped shape the area. This approach ensures that visitors gain a deeper understanding of the destination while local voices remain central to the experience.

Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism often takes place in rural, mountain, coastal, or forest areas where local communities are directly affected by visitor activity and tourism development. For this reason, community empowerment should be embedded within the business model rather than treated as a separate activity. Tourism SMEs can support inclusion by recruiting and training local residents, working with local suppliers and service providers, and involving communities in decisions that affect land use and visitor management. For example, a canyoning company operating in a rural valley could work with local authorities and residents to manage visitor pressures, train local women as assistant instructors, and offer outdoor skills programmes for young people in the area. Such initiatives help ensure that tourism benefits are shared more widely and contribute to the long-term resilience of local communities.

Across all three tourism sectors, the key principle remains the same: community empowerment and social inclusion should be visible not only in business values, but also in who participates, who contributes, who benefits, and who helps shape tourism development over time.

Roadmap for Implementation

Step 1: Map Stakeholders	Identify the people and groups connected to your tourism activity, including residents, employees, suppliers, community organisations, schools, local authorities, community leaders, vulnerable groups, and underrepresented voices. Understanding who is affected by, contributes to, or benefits from tourism is the first step towards more inclusive decision-making.
Step 2: Identify Barriers and Gaps	Review where exclusion may be occurring. Ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is not involved in planning? • Who has limited access to jobs or training? • Which visitors may face accessibility barriers? • Which local groups are missing from partnerships?
Step 3: Set Inclusion and Empowerment Objectives	Establish realistic and measurable priorities for the next 6–12 months. Objectives may include increasing local supplier spending, recruiting more local staff, improving accessibility, establishing community partnerships, or providing staff training on inclusive practices.
Step 4: Build Participation Mechanisms	Create opportunities for communities and stakeholders to contribute ideas, feedback, and perspectives. This may involve community meetings, surveys, advisory groups, partnerships, pilot initiatives, or ongoing feedback channels that support meaningful participation.
Step 5: Embed Inclusive Practices	Embed the principle into everyday practice. This may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive recruitment processes • Staff induction • Supplier selection • Visitor communication • Product design • Accessibility improvements • Community collaboration activities
Step 6: Train and Build Awareness	Ensure that staff understand inclusion, respectful communication, local sensitivity, fairness in service delivery, and the social aims of the business.
Step 7: Monitor Progress and Outcomes	Track a small number of indicators to assess progress and identify areas for improvement. Examples may include the number of community partnerships established, the proportion of local employees, staff retention rates, accessibility improvements implemented, community feedback received, and the diversity of participants, employees, or collaborators.

This roadmap provides practical guidance for implementing Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion within your organisation. For a broader approach to embedding sustainability across all aspects of your business, see the Sustainability Implementation Journey at the end of this Framework.



Summary

Definition	Ensuring that local communities and underrepresented groups can participate fairly in tourism planning, employment, partnerships, services, and benefits.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve local communities in tourism design and review. • Apply inclusive and fair employment practices. • Build partnerships that create shared local value. • Improve accessibility and inclusion in visitor services • Monitor who benefits from tourism activity
Linked Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Sustainability • Visitor Education and Engagement • Innovation and Green Transition Tools



06



PRINCIPLE 6

Climate Action and Resilience

Principle 6: Climate Action and Resilience



Definition

Climate action refers to the practical steps taken to respond to climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, limiting environmental pressures, and improving the ability of people, businesses, and ecosystems to cope with climate-related challenges now and in the future. It is aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action, which calls for urgent action to address climate change and its impacts (United Nations, 2015). Climate action is generally based on two complementary approaches: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation focuses on reducing the causes of climate change by lowering greenhouse gas emissions, while adaptation involves anticipating climate-related impacts and taking action to minimise risks and respond effectively to changing conditions (European Environment Agency, 2024).

Adaptation is closely linked to resilience, which refers to the ability of social, economic, and environmental systems to withstand, respond to, and recover from climate-related disruptions while maintaining their essential functions (IPCC, 2018). Tourism is highly dependent on stable weather conditions, healthy ecosystems, reliable infrastructure, and predictable travel patterns. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and shifting visitor behaviour increasingly affect the quality, safety, and profitability of tourism activities. These challenges can be particularly significant for SMEs, which often have fewer financial and human resources to respond to sudden disruptions.

Climate Action and Resilience therefore refer to the integration of mitigation and adaptation measures into tourism operations, while strengthening the capacity of tourism SMEs to anticipate, respond to, and recover from climate-related challenges. By taking action today, tourism businesses can reduce environmental impacts, improve business continuity, protect local resources, and support the long-term sustainability of destinations.



Importance

Addressing Environmental, Cultural and Social Challenges

Climate action and resilience address a wide range of interconnected challenges that directly affect tourism businesses, destinations, and local communities.

From an environmental perspective, climate change is contributing to rising temperatures, changing tourism seasonality, more frequent and intense extreme weather events, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss. In urban destinations, climate-related pressures such as heat islands and increased demand for cooling and water resources are becoming increasingly common. These impacts can create significant challenges for tourism operations, including infrastructure damage, reduced accessibility, increased operating costs, and greater pressure on natural resources.

From a social perspective, climate change can amplify existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly for local communities and workers who depend on tourism. SMEs and seasonal workers are often among the most exposed to disruptions caused by extreme weather events or changing visitor patterns, while having fewer resources to absorb economic shocks. These impacts can result in job instability, reduced income, and increased pressure on local livelihoods. Climate-related challenges can also affect public health and wellbeing through issues such as heat-related illnesses, water shortages, and food insecurity, influencing both residents and visitors.

From a cultural perspective, climate change threatens historic sites, traditional landscapes, and cultural practices that are closely linked to local environmental conditions. Environmental degradation, natural disasters, and changing tourism flows can place significant pressure on cultural heritage and community identity. Climate action is therefore essential not only for protecting ecosystems, but also for safeguarding cultural assets, preserving local traditions, and maintaining the long-term attractiveness and authenticity of tourism destinations.

These environmental, social, and cultural impacts should be understood as business risks that affect the entire tourism value chain, including suppliers, employees, infrastructure, visitor experiences, and destination competitiveness.



Benefits for SMEs

Climate action and resilience should not be seen as a constraint for SMEs, but as a strategic lever for competitiveness, long-term viability, and adaptation to a rapidly changing tourism environment:

- ✓ **Business continuity and risk reduction:** By anticipating and preparing for climate-related disruptions such as extreme weather events, heatwaves, or water shortages, SMEs can reduce the likelihood of operational interruptions, cancellations, and infrastructure damage. This proactive approach strengthens their ability to maintain stable activity throughout the year, even in increasingly uncertain environmental conditions.
- ✓ **Cost savings and improved efficiency:** Measures such as reducing energy consumption, improving water management, or investing in renewable energy can significantly lower operational costs over time. For SMEs, which often operate with limited margins, these savings can directly improve financial stability and competitiveness.
- ✓ **Market positioning and customer attractiveness:** Travellers are increasingly sensitive to sustainability issues and climate responsibility. SMEs that demonstrate concrete climate commitments can strengthen their reputation, attract environmentally conscious customers, and differentiate themselves in a competitive tourism market. Demonstrating resilience and proactive adaptation enhances a company's ability to build stronger partnerships within destination networks and to integrate more effectively into sustainable tourism value chains.



Key Actions for SMEs



1 Build Climate Resilience through Adaptation Measures

To remain competitive in a changing climate, tourism SMEs should assess the environmental risks that may affect their activities, including heatwaves, floods, storms, and water scarcity, and implement targeted adaptation measures. This may involve identifying climate risks across locations, operations,

and supply chains, improving infrastructure resilience through measures such as drainage systems, shading, or cooling solutions, and securing access to critical resources such as water and energy. Businesses may also need to adapt services, operating periods, or tourism products to changing climate conditions, while diversifying activities, customer segments, or seasons to reduce dependence on climate-sensitive demand. Nature-based solutions, such as planting trees, creating green spaces, or restoring permeable surfaces, can further strengthen resilience while improving local environmental conditions.

2 Develop Low-Carbon Operations

Tourism SMEs can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by integrating low-carbon choices into daily operations, including transport, procurement, and service design. This may involve encouraging visitors and staff to use low-emission transport options such as public transport, cycling, or shared mobility services, prioritising local and seasonal sourcing to reduce transport-related emissions, and designing tourism experiences that minimise travel intensity and environmental impact. Collaboration with suppliers that follow sustainable and low-carbon practices can further reduce emissions across the value chain.

3 Improve Energy Management

Energy use is a key area for both emissions reduction and business resilience. Managing energy more efficiently can reduce operational costs while limiting exposure to energy price volatility. Tourism SMEs can improve energy performance by tracking and monitoring consumption, upgrading insulation and equipment, optimising heating and cooling systems according to seasonal needs, and transitioning to renewable energy sources where feasible.

4 Strengthen Resource Management

Efficient resource use supports both climate mitigation and adaptation by reducing environmental impacts and improving operational stability. Tourism SMEs should monitor and manage water consumption, particularly during periods of scarcity, while reducing waste through improved sorting, recycling, and the avoidance of single-use products. Prioritising durable, reusable, and repairable materials, alongside more resilient procurement practices, can help reduce dependence on vulnerable supply chains and improve long-term sustainability.

5 Engage People and Partners

Climate action requires the active involvement of employees, suppliers, customers, and other stakeholders to be effective over time. Tourism SMEs should provide staff training on topics such as energy efficiency, water conservation, and climate risk preparedness, while working collaboratively with suppliers to improve sustainability and resilience throughout the value chain. Businesses can also encourage visitors to adopt responsible behaviours, such as reducing energy and water use or choosing low-carbon transport options and should communicate their climate actions and progress in a clear and transparent manner.

Application in Tourism Sectors

This principle can be applied across different tourism sectors, with each sector offering specific pathways to address climate change through mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building, depending on their relationship with natural resources, infrastructure and visitor engagement.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is inherently linked to natural environments, which are directly affected by climate change. This creates strong opportunities for both mitigation and adaptation actions. Tourism SMEs in this sector can reduce their carbon footprint through low-impact operations, renewable energy use, and sustainable transport options. At the same time, they can contribute to climate adaptation by protecting ecosystems that act as natural buffers (e.g. forests, wetlands) and by adjusting and diversifying their activities to changing environmental conditions or modifying itineraries. In addition, it provides strong educational opportunities, helping visitors understand climate change impacts and encouraging long-term behavioural change. SMEs in this sector are therefore not only operators, but also facilitators of climate awareness and local resilience.

Cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is linked to both tangible and intangible heritage, which can be increasingly affected by climate change through extreme weather events, degradation of sites, or changes in local livelihoods. SMEs can contribute to mitigation by promoting local products, short supply chains and low-impact experiences, thereby reducing emissions associated with transport and consumption patterns. In terms of adaptation, cultural tourism actors may need to adjust how heritage is preserved and accessed, for example, by adapting opening periods, protecting sites from climate risks, or integrating climate considerations into heritage management strategies.

Cultural tourism also contributes to resilience by preserving traditional knowledge and practices that are often closely adapted to local environmental conditions, such as water management, agriculture or construction techniques. These practices can offer valuable insights for climate adaptation. Furthermore, this sector can raise awareness among visitors about the links between climate change, heritage and local communities, fostering more responsible and respectful behaviours.

Adventure tourism

Adventure tourism operates in dynamic and often fragile environments such as mountains, coastal areas, forests or rivers, which are highly exposed to climate variability and extreme events. This makes both adaptation and resilience central to the sector. SMEs must continuously adjust their activities to changing conditions, such as altered weather patterns, increased risks (e.g. landslides, floods), or reduced accessibility of certain sites. Mitigation efforts in this sector include reducing the environmental footprint of activities through sustainable transport solutions, responsible equipment use, and energy-efficient operations. However, due to the nature of adventure tourism, adaptation is often the priority, requiring flexible planning, risk management strategies and the ability to respond quickly to environmental changes.

Adventure tourism also plays an important role in building resilience by educating visitors about climate risks, safety and responsible behaviour in natural environments. Guides and operators act as

intermediaries between visitors and the environment, promoting awareness of climate impacts and encouraging practices that reduce pressure on ecosystems. This contributes not only to environmental protection but also to the long-term viability of tourism activities.

Roadmap for Implementation

Climate Action and Resilience encompasses two complementary approaches: adaptation and mitigation. While both contribute to more sustainable and resilient tourism businesses, they address different challenges and therefore require different implementation processes. The following roadmaps provide practical guidance for tourism SMEs seeking to strengthen resilience to climate-related risks while reducing their environmental impact.

Adaptation Strategy

	Step 1: Define the Scope	Map the scope of your business, including sites, services, partners, and the wider value chain. Consider suppliers, on-site activities, and supporting services.
	Step 2: Identify and Assess Risks and Vulnerabilities	Identify the main climate hazards affecting your business, such as heatwaves, floods, storms, or water scarcity. Assess how these risks could impact operations, infrastructure, employees, visitors, and supply chains.
	Step 3: Evaluate Adaptive Capacity	Review your current ability to cope with climate-related risks. Consider existing resources, skills, financial capacity, infrastructure, partnerships, and support mechanisms.
	Step 4: Prioritise Key Risks	Focus on the risks most likely to affect business continuity, visitor safety, or long-term sustainability.
	Step 5: Set Adaptation Objectives and Actions	Define objectives and identify practical adaptation measures, such as improving infrastructure resilience, securing critical resources, diversifying tourism activities, strengthening supply chains, or implementing nature-based solutions.
	Step 6: Monitor and Improve	Review the effectiveness of adaptation measures regularly, particularly following extreme weather events. Use lessons learned to refine and strengthen your approach.
	Step 7: Communicate Progress	Share adaptation actions and achievements with staff, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders in a transparent manner.

Mitigation Strategy:

Step 1: Understand Climate Change Impacts	Identify how climate change affects your operations, costs, customers, and supply chain, and understand the opportunities associated with reducing emissions.
Step 2: Build Internal Commitment	Engage management and staff in climate action efforts and assign responsibility for implementation and monitoring.
Step 3: Define Scope and Boundaries:	Determine which activities will be included in your emissions reduction approach, including buildings, energy use, transport, procurement, and waste.

Step 4: Measure Your Emissions Baseline	Estimate greenhouse gas emissions and identify the main sources of emissions across business operations.
Step 5: Prioritise Emission Sources and Set Targets	Focus on the most significant sources of emissions and establish realistic short-, medium-, and long-term reduction targets.
Step 6: Implement Reduction Actions	Introduce measures such as energy efficiency improvements, renewable energy adoption, low-carbon transport solutions, sustainable procurement, and waste reduction initiatives.
Step 7: Monitor, Report, and Improve	Track emissions over time, review progress, communicate results, and continuously improve performance. Offset only residual emissions after reduction efforts have been maximised.

For both approaches, actions should be prioritised over time, beginning with short-term measures, progressing to more structured medium-term interventions, and ultimately supporting longer-term transformational changes to business operations and tourism models.

This roadmap provides practical guidance for implementing Climate Action and Resilience within your organisation. For a broader approach to embedding sustainability across all aspects of your business, see the Sustainability Implementation Journey at the end of this Framework.

Summary

Definition	Climate Action and Resilience refer to measures that reduce environmental impacts while strengthening the ability of tourism businesses to adapt to climate-related challenges, maintain business continuity, and support the long-term sustainability of destinations.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build climate resilience through adaptation measures and effective resource management • Reduce emissions through low-carbon and energy-efficient operations • Improve energy and resource efficiency across business activities • Engage people and strengthen collective action across the value chain
Linked Frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Responsibility • Biodiversity and Natural Resources • Sustainable Resource Management



07



PRINCIPLE 7

Visitor Education and Engagement

Principle 7: Visitor Education and Engagement



Definition

Visitor education and engagement in tourism refer to the deliberate and structured efforts made by tourism providers to inform, inspire, and actively involve visitors in understanding and supporting sustainable practices during their travel experience. This principle goes beyond simply providing information and seeks to influence visitor awareness, attitudes, and behaviours in ways that contribute positively to environmental, cultural, and social sustainability. In the context of tourism SMEs, visitor education involves communicating relevant, accurate, and accessible information about the destination, including its environmental features, cultural heritage, local communities, and sustainability challenges. Visitor engagement, in turn, focuses on creating opportunities for visitors to participate actively in responsible practices rather than remaining passive consumers of experiences.

This principle recognises that visitors are key actors within the tourism system. Their behaviours, including resource consumption, waste generation, interactions with local communities, and respect for cultural and environmental assets, have a direct impact on the sustainability of destinations. Tourism businesses, therefore, play an important role in shaping how tourism is understood and practised. For tourism SMEs, applying this principle means designing experiences that not only inform and entertain but also foster awareness, responsibility, and meaningful connections with the places visited. It involves integrating sustainability messages throughout the visitor journey, from pre-arrival communication to on-site interpretation and post-visit follow-up, helping visitors understand their role and encouraging more responsible behaviour.



Importance

Addressing Environmental, Cultural and Social Challenges

Visitor education and engagement are essential because tourism impacts are not only generated by businesses, but also by visitor behaviour. Even the most sustainable tourism operations can be undermined if visitors are not aware of local rules, environmental sensitivities, cultural norms, or community expectations.

From an environmental perspective, visitor behaviour can have a significant influence on the condition of natural resources and ecosystems. Activities such as littering, excessive water and energy consumption, disturbance of wildlife, damage to vegetation, or failure to follow designated routes can place considerable pressure on destinations, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas. Educating visitors about these issues helps reduce negative impacts and encourages more responsible interactions with natural environments.

From a cultural perspective, a lack of awareness or understanding can contribute to the erosion of local traditions, disrespect towards cultural practices, and inappropriate behaviour at heritage sites, religious

spaces, or community events. Visitor education helps foster appreciation of local identity, heritage, and customs, encouraging respectful and meaningful interactions between visitors and host communities.

From a social perspective, visitor behaviour can influence the relationship between tourists and local residents. Misunderstandings, inappropriate conduct, or a lack of respect for local ways of life can create tensions and negatively affect community perceptions of tourism. By providing visitors with clear guidance and opportunities to engage positively with destinations, tourism SMEs can help strengthen relationships between visitors and local communities while supporting more inclusive and responsible tourism development.



Benefits for SMEs

Integrating visitor education and engagement into tourism experiences offers several benefits for SMEs:

- ✓ **Enhancing the quality of the visitor experience:** Visitors increasingly seek meaningful, authentic, and educational experiences. Providing context, interpretation, and opportunities for engagement can deepen understanding, strengthen emotional connections, and improve overall visitor satisfaction.
- ✓ **Reducing negative impacts and operational risks:** Educated visitors are more likely to adopt responsible behaviours, respect local communities, and minimise negative impacts on natural and cultural resources. This can help reduce management challenges and support destination sustainability.
- ✓ **Strengthening brand identity and positioning:** Businesses that actively promote responsible tourism and sustainability can differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace and appeal to sustainability-conscious travellers.
- ✓ **Encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth:** Visitors who feel connected to a destination and understand its environmental, cultural, and social value are more likely to return, recommend the experience to others, and become advocates for responsible tourism.



Key Actions for SMEs

1 Provide Clear and Accessible Sustainability Information Before And During The Visit

SMEs should communicate essential information about sustainability practices, local conditions, and expected visitor behaviour across different stages of the visitor journey. This includes websites, booking confirmations, welcome materials, signage, and staff interactions. Information should be clear, concise, and adapted to different audiences. For example, guidance on water use in drought-prone areas, waste separation rules, or respectful behaviour in cultural or natural sites should be easy to understand and visible at relevant points.

2 Integrate Interpretation and Storytelling into Tourism Experiences

Rather than presenting isolated facts, SMEs should use storytelling techniques to explain the environmental, cultural, and social significance of the destination. This helps visitors understand why certain behaviours matter. Interpretation can include guided tours, digital content, panels, audio guides, or informal explanations by staff. The aim is to create a narrative that connects visitors emotionally and intellectually with the place.

3 Encourage Responsible Behaviour through Nudges and Practical Tools

SMEs should design their services in ways that make responsible choices easier for visitors. This may include providing refill stations, clearly marked recycling bins, reusable materials, suggested low-impact itineraries, or reminders about respectful behaviour. Behavioural “nudges” (e.g., friendly messages, visual cues, default options) can be highly effective in influencing visitor actions without being intrusive.

4 Create Opportunities for Active Visitor Participation

Engagement can be strengthened by involving visitors directly in sustainability-related activities. This may include workshops, volunteering opportunities, local events, citizen science initiatives, or hands-on cultural experiences. Active participation helps transform visitors from passive observers into contributors to the destination.

5 Train Staff to Communicate Sustainability Effectively

Staff play a key role in shaping visitor behaviour. SMEs should ensure that employees understand sustainability principles and are able to communicate them clearly, confidently, and respectfully. Staff should be prepared to answer questions, explain local practices, and encourage responsible behaviour in a positive and engaging way.

Application in Tourism Sectors

Ecotourism

In ecotourism, visitor education and engagement are often central to the tourism experience. Tourism SMEs can help visitors understand local ecosystems, species, and conservation challenges while encouraging behaviours that minimise environmental impacts. Guided nature walks, wildlife observation activities, and interpretation programmes can provide opportunities for visitors to learn about the natural environment and their role in protecting it. For example, a wildlife observation company may provide binoculars and field guides, explain species behaviour, and encourage visitors to record sightings, transforming the experience into both an educational and participatory activity. Similarly, an eco-lodge may offer talks on local biodiversity, water scarcity, or forest management, helping guests understand the environmental context of the destination and how they can reduce their impact during their stay.

Cultural Tourism

In cultural tourism, visitor education and engagement focus on developing a deeper understanding of local identity, heritage, traditions, and contemporary community life. Tourism SMEs can help visitors appreciate the cultural significance of destinations by providing context, encouraging respectful behaviour, and presenting diverse perspectives. This may involve interpreting heritage sites, explaining local customs, or highlighting the relationship between tourism and community wellbeing. For example, a guided visit in a historic village may introduce visitors not only to its architecture and history, but also to the experiences of local residents and the role tourism plays in shaping everyday life. Similarly, gastronomy experiences can provide opportunities for visitors to learn about traditional production methods, seasonal ingredients, and cultural practices while engaging directly with local producers.



Adventure Tourism

In adventure tourism, visitor education is often closely linked to safety, environmental responsibility, and respect for local communities. Tourism SMEs can help participants understand how their actions affect natural environments and encourage behaviours that minimise environmental impacts during outdoor activities. Briefings on environmental protection, waste management, cultural sensitivity, and responsible recreation can be integrated into the visitor experience before and during activities. For example, a mountain guiding company may begin each excursion with guidance on environmental stewardship and cultural respect, while incorporating interpretation throughout the activity. Similarly, a kayaking provider may educate participants about marine ecosystems and plastic pollution, encouraging them to contribute to conservation efforts through voluntary environmental initiatives.

Across all tourism sectors, visitor education and engagement help transform visitors from passive consumers into active participants in sustainability. By increasing awareness, encouraging responsible behaviour, and creating meaningful connections with destinations, tourism SMEs can contribute to more sustainable tourism experiences and positive outcomes for local communities and environments.



Roadmap for Implementation

	Step 1: Assess Current Practices	Assess current visitor information and engagement practices. SMEs should begin by reviewing how and where information is currently provided to visitors. This includes websites, booking systems, on-site materials, and staff communication. The aim is to identify gaps, inconsistencies, or overly complex messages that may reduce effectiveness.
	Step 2: Define Key Sustainability Messages	Businesses should identify the most important messages they want visitors to understand and act upon. These may relate to environmental protection, cultural respect, local behaviour norms, or resource use. Messages should be prioritised and adapted to the specific context of the destination.
	Step 3: Design Communication Materials and Tools	SMEs should develop clear and engaging materials such as signage, digital content, printed guides, or visual cues. These should be accessible, multilingual where necessary, and tailored to different visitor profiles.
	Step 4: Integrate Education Throughout the Visitor Journey	Sustainability information should be embedded across all stages of the experience: before arrival (emails, website), during the visit (briefings, signage, activities), and after departure (follow-up communication). This ensures continuity and reinforcement of messages.
	Step 5: Train Staff and Build Capacity	Staff should receive training on how to communicate sustainability messages effectively. This includes using positive language, adapting to different audiences, and encouraging responsible behaviour without being confrontational.
	Step 6: Create Opportunities for Participation	SMEs should identify simple ways to involve visitors, such as interactive activities, workshops, or voluntary initiatives. These opportunities for active engagement should be realistic, meaningful, and aligned with the business model.
	Step 7: Monitor Visitor Engagement	Businesses should observe how visitors respond to information and engagement efforts. Feedback can be collected through informal conversations, surveys, or observation. This helps identify what works and what needs improvement.





Step 8: Review and Improve Communication and Engagement Strategies

Based on feedback and experience, SMEs should regularly update their approaches, simplifying messages, improving tools, and adapting to new visitor expectations or sustainability challenges.



Summary

Definition	This principle consists of providing visitors with the knowledge and opportunities needed to recognise, value, and adopt responsible behaviours throughout their tourism experience.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear sustainability information. • Integrate storytelling and interpretation. • Encourage responsible behaviour through practical tools.
Linked Frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Sustainability • Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion • Biodiversity and Natural Resources





08



PRINCIPLE 8

Innovation and Green Transition Tools

Principle 8: Innovation and Green Transition Tools



Definition

According to the OECD, eco-innovation involves the development and application of new products, processes, and organisational methods that reduce environmental impacts and improve resource efficiency (OECD, 2013). Within the tourism sector, innovation and green transition tools refer to the use of technologies, processes, and business models that help tourism SMEs reduce environmental impacts, improve operational efficiency, and support the transition towards a more sustainable and low-carbon economy. These tools may include renewable energy systems, smart energy and water management technologies, digital visitor management solutions, sustainable mobility tools, and innovative approaches to service design and business operations. According to UN Tourism, innovation and digital transformation can support more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism models while contributing to broader sustainability objectives (UN Tourism, 2025).

For tourism SMEs, innovation provides practical opportunities to improve sustainability performance, remain competitive, respond to changing customer expectations, and adapt to evolving environmental regulations. By embracing innovation, businesses can strengthen resilience, improve efficiency, and create long-term value for both destinations and visitors.



Importance

Addressing Environmental, Social and Economic Challenges

Innovation and green transition tools play a crucial role in addressing many of the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the tourism sector today. As destinations seek to reduce their environmental footprint while remaining competitive and resilient, tourism SMEs increasingly need practical solutions that support more sustainable ways of operating.

From an environmental perspective, tourism contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, resource consumption, waste generation, and pressure on natural ecosystems. Innovation can help SMEs reduce these impacts through the adoption of more efficient technologies and sustainable business practices. Examples include smart energy management systems, renewable energy technologies, water-saving devices, digital monitoring tools, and waste reduction solutions. These innovations enable businesses to improve environmental performance while reducing operational costs.

From a social perspective, innovation can strengthen connections between tourism businesses, visitors, and local communities. Digital platforms can help promote local suppliers, support community-based tourism experiences, and improve accessibility for diverse visitor groups. Innovation can also enhance communication, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and create new opportunities for participation and collaboration within destinations.

From an economic perspective, tourism SMEs face increasing pressure to remain competitive while responding to changing consumer expectations, rising operational costs, and evolving environmental regulations. Innovation provides businesses with new ways to improve efficiency, develop sustainable products and services, access new markets, and strengthen long-term resilience. By embracing innovation, SMEs can adapt more effectively to emerging challenges while creating value for both visitors and destinations.

Innovation and green transition tools, therefore, play an important role in supporting a more sustainable, resilient, and future-oriented tourism sector.

Benefits for SMEs

Integrating innovation and green transition tools into business operations offers several benefits for tourism SMEs:

- ✓ **Improved Resource Efficiency and Cost Savings:** Innovative technologies can help businesses reduce energy consumption, water use, and waste generation while lowering operational costs. These efficiencies can improve financial performance and reduce exposure to rising resource prices.
- ✓ **Enhanced Competitiveness:** Travellers are increasingly seeking sustainable and responsible tourism experiences. SMEs that adopt innovative sustainability solutions can differentiate themselves within the market and appeal to environmentally conscious visitors.
- ✓ **Stronger Brand Reputation:** Visible sustainability actions and innovative practices can strengthen business credibility and demonstrate a commitment to responsible tourism. This can improve customer trust, strengthen brand identity, and support long-term business growth.
- ✓ **Access to New Opportunities:** Businesses that embrace innovation may gain access to sustainability-focused funding opportunities, partnerships, certification schemes, and green tourism networks. These opportunities can support continuous improvement and future development.

Key Actions for SMEs

1 Adopt Energy-Efficient and Renewable Technologies

A practical first step for tourism SMEs is to reduce their environmental footprint through the adoption of energy-efficient equipment and renewable energy solutions. This may include installing LED lighting, smart thermostats, motion sensors, and energy management systems to optimise energy use and reduce waste. Where financially and technically feasible, businesses can also invest in renewable energy technologies such as solar panels to reduce carbon emissions and improve energy security. These measures not only contribute to environmental sustainability but can also generate significant long-term cost savings.

2 Use Digital Tools to Monitor and Optimise Resource Use

Digital technologies can help tourism SMEs better understand and manage their environmental impacts. By implementing tools that monitor energy consumption, water use, and waste generation, businesses can identify inefficiencies, detect issues such as water leaks or excessive resource consumption, and make more informed decisions. Data-driven insights enable SMEs to track progress, measure

sustainability performance, and implement targeted improvements that support both environmental and financial objectives.

3 Engage with Digital Platforms and Green Innovation Networks

Tourism SMEs can accelerate their green transition by engaging with digital platforms, innovation networks, and sustainability-focused initiatives. This may include promoting sustainability achievements through booking platforms, joining eco-certified tourism networks such as Ecobnb or Green Pearls, or participating in innovation hubs such as the European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs). These networks provide opportunities to access new knowledge, discover innovative tools, share best practices, and collaborate with other stakeholders working towards more sustainable tourism models. Participation can also help SMEs overcome common barriers to innovation, including limited technical expertise and restricted access to resources and support.

Application in Tourism Sectors

Innovation and green transition tools can be applied across different tourism sectors, with each sector using them in distinct ways depending on the nature of its activities and its interaction with environmental, cultural, and community resources.

Ecotourism

In ecotourism, innovation and green tools are used to minimise environmental impact while strengthening conservation outcomes. SMEs in this sector can implement renewable energy solutions, such as solar-powered accommodation, as well as smart water management systems and waste tracking technologies to reduce pressure on local ecosystems. Digital monitoring tools can also be used to assess biodiversity impact and track visitor pressure in sensitive areas. In addition, mobile applications and digital guides can educate tourists on responsible behaviour and even encourage participation in citizen science activities, such as collecting environmental data.

Cultural tourism

In cultural tourism, innovation tools play a key role in both promoting and protecting cultural heritage. Digital technologies such as virtual reality and virtual tours allow visitors to experience cultural sites and activities without contributing to physical damage or overcrowding. These tools can also attract new audiences, particularly younger visitors, by offering more engaging and interactive experiences. Smart visitor management systems and digital ticketing platforms can further support sustainability by regulating tourist flows. By scheduling entry times and monitoring real-time occupancy levels, these tools help reduce pressure on heritage sites while improving the overall visitor experience.

Adventure tourism

In adventure tourism, innovation and green transition tools are essential for both environmental protection and visitor safety. This type of tourism often takes place in natural environments such as mountains, forests, or coastal areas, where conditions can change rapidly, and risks may be higher. Digital tools can enhance both safety and sustainability. For example, weather applications and early warning systems can alert visitors to hazardous conditions such as storms or avalanches. In mountain areas, avalanche monitoring systems provide real-time risk updates, allowing activities to be planned

more safely. Increased awareness of environmental conditions and risks also encourages more responsible behaviour among visitors. As tourists become more informed, they are more likely to respect biodiversity, follow guidelines, and adapt their behaviour to support sustainable practices.

Across all tourism sectors, innovation and green transition tools can help businesses improve sustainability performance, reduce environmental impacts, enhance visitor experiences, and strengthen long-term resilience. Whether through renewable technologies, digital solutions, or new business models, innovation provides practical opportunities for tourism SMEs to support the transition towards a more sustainable and competitive tourism sector.

Roadmap for Implementation

	Step 1: Assess Current Practices	Start by reviewing your current operations. Identify where your business consumes the most resources (e.g. energy, water, materials) and where improvements can be made. Consider both environmental impact and operational efficiency.
	Step 2: Set Clear and Achievable Goals	Define realistic sustainability goals based on your assessment. These may include reducing energy consumption, minimising waste, improving resource efficiency, or enhancing customer awareness of sustainable practices.
	Step 3: Identify Innovative Tools and Technologies	Explore available tools and solutions that can support your goals. This may include smart energy management systems, water-saving technologies, digital booking or visitor management tools, or platforms that promote sustainable products and services. Choose solutions that are appropriate for your business size and budget.
	Step 4: Train Staff and Engage Stakeholders	Ensure that your staff understand the importance of sustainability and how to use new tools effectively. Engage suppliers, partners, and local communities to support your efforts. Collaboration can help maximise impact and ensure that solutions are adapted to the local context.
	Step 5: Monitor Performance and Measure Progress	Track your progress using simple indicators such as energy use, water consumption, waste reduction, or customer feedback. Regular monitoring allows you to evaluate what is working and identify areas for further improvement.
	Step 6: Communicate Your Achievements	Share your sustainability actions and results with customers through your website, social media, or on-site communication. This helps build trust, strengthen your brand, and attract environmentally conscious visitors.

This roadmap provides practical guidance for implementing Innovation and Green Transition Tools within your organisation. For a broader approach to embedding sustainability across all aspects of your business, see the Sustainability Implementation Journey at the end of this Framework.



Summary

Definition	Innovation and Green Transition Tools refer to the use of technologies, processes, and business models that help tourism SMEs reduce environmental impacts, improve resource efficiency, and support the transition towards more sustainable tourism operations.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopt energy-efficient and renewable technologies.• Use digital tools to monitor and optimise resource use.• Engage with digital platforms and green innovation networks.
Linked Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sustainable Resource Management• Climate Action and Resilience• Visitor Education and Engagement



PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FRAMEWORK

Implementation Guide

Your Sustainability Journey

Implementation Guide – Your Sustainability Journey

This section provides a practical roadmap to help tourism SMEs translate the eight Practice Principles into meaningful action. Rather than implementing all principles at once, businesses are encouraged to take a gradual and structured approach that reflects their size, resources, and level of sustainability maturity. The Sustainability Implementation Journey supports tourism SMEs in moving from awareness and assessment to implementation, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

The roadmap should be viewed as a flexible guide rather than a fixed process. Businesses may progress at different speeds and prioritise different principles depending on their context, but the overall objective remains the same: embedding sustainability into everyday operations and long-term decision-making.

Sustainability Journey Checklist



Complete this checklist to begin your sustainability journey. Tick each box as you progress through the eight steps.



Learn

Explore the Practice Principles Framework and understand the eight sustainability principles.



Set Goals

Develop SMART sustainability goals to guide your progress.



Assess

Complete the Sustainability Self-Assessment to identify your current position.



Explore

Explore your National Support Guide to access local resources and support.



Prioritise

Select the three principles that matter most to your business.



Implement

Put your actions into practice and engage your team and stakeholders.



Plan

Create a simple action plan with clear objectives and timelines.



Review

Monitor progress, celebrate achievements, and identify opportunities for improvement.

Ready?

Turn the page to complete your Sustainability Self Assessment.



Guiding Your Sustainability Journey



The 8 Practice Principles Guiding Your Sustainability Journey



Together, these principles provide a practical framework for helping tourism SMEs become more sustainable, resilient, and competitive.



Sustainability Journey Roadmap



Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool

Where are you on your sustainability journey?

Environmental Responsibility

	Yes	Partly	No
We have identified the main environmental impacts of our business			
We have measures in place to reduce our environmental footprint			
We regularly review and improve our environmental practices			

Biodiversity & Natural Resources

	Yes	Partly	No
We understand how our activities affect local ecosystems and natural resources			
We take steps to minimise negative impacts on biodiversity			
We actively support the protection or enhancement of local natural assets			

Cultural Sustainability

	Yes	Partly	No
We promote and respect local culture, heritage and traditions			
We work with local cultural stakeholders where appropriate			
Our tourism experiences help visitors understand and appreciate local culture			

Sustainable Resource Management

	Yes	Partly	No
We monitor our use of energy, water, or other resources			
We actively work to reduce waste and improve efficiency			
We regularly review opportunities to improve resource management			

Community Empowerment & Social Inclusion

	Yes	Partly	No
We engage with local communities and stakeholders			
We support local suppliers, businesses, or community programmes			
We aim to ensure our services and opportunities are inclusive and accessible			

Climate Action & Resilience

	Yes	Partly	No
We understand the climate-related risks that may affect our business			
We have introduced measures to reduce emissions or environmental impacts			
We are taking steps to improve resilience to future climate challenges			

Visitor Education & Engagement

	Yes	Partly	No
We provide visitors with information about responsible tourism practices			
Sustainability messages are integrated into visitor experiences			
We encourage visitors to contribute positively to the destination			

Innovation & Green Transition Tools

	Yes	Partly	No
We use technology or innovation to improve sustainability performance			
We explore new tools or approaches to reduce environmental impacts			
Innovation is considered when planning future improvements			

Understanding Your Results

Mostly...	Interpretation
No	This area may represent a priority for future action
Partly	Good progress has been made, but there is still room for improvement
Yes	Sustainability practices are becoming embedded within this area of your business

Reflection Questions

Once you have completed the assessment, consider the following questions:

1. Which principles represent your strongest areas of performance?

2. Which principles require the greatest improvement?

3. Which sustainability challenges are most relevant to your business and why?

4. What resources, partnerships, or support could help you to strengthen your sustainability efforts?

Setting Priorities

Attempting to address all sustainability challenges at once can be overwhelming. Instead, identify up to three priority areas that will have the greatest positive impact on your business, visitors, community and environment.

Priority 1:
Priority 2:
Priority 3:

These priorities can then be used to develop a Sustainability Action Plan and guide the implementation of the Practice Principles over time.

SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN

Turn your priorities into practical actions.

Based on your self-assessment, choose up to three priority areas and create an action plan to drive improvement in your business.

Focus on actions that are achievable, relevant and will have the greatest positive impact for your business.

Tip: Use the SMART guide on the next page to help define your actions.

1

PRIORITY AREA #1

Identify the Practice Principle this area relates to.

OBJECTIVE

What do you want to achieve?

ACTIONS

What specific actions will you take?

-
-
-

NOTES

TIMELINE

When will you do it?

RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Who will lead this?

SUCCESS INDICATOR

How will you know it has been achieved?

2

PRIORITY AREA #2

Identify the Practice Principle this area relates to.

OBJECTIVE

What do you want to achieve?

ACTIONS

What specific actions will you take?

-
-
-

NOTES

TIMELINE

When will you do it?

RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Who will lead this?

SUCCESS INDICATOR

How will you know it has been achieved?



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3

PRIORITY AREA #3

Identify the Practice Principle this area relates to.

OBJECTIVE

What do you want to achieve?

ACTIONS

What specific actions will you take?

-
-
-

NOTES**TIMELINE**

When will you do it?

RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Who will lead this?

SUCCESS INDICATOR

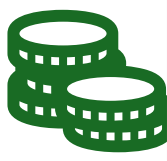
How will you know it has been achieved?

RESOURCES & SUPPORT NEEDED

What support or resources do you need to make these actions successful?



Training & capacity building



Funding or investment



Technology or equipment



External expertise or consultancy



Partnerships & collaboration



Support from local authorities/tourism bodies



Other

REVIEW DATE

Set a date to review your progress and update your action plan.

SETTING SMART SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

Transform ideas into clear and achievable sustainability actions.

S	M	A	R	T
SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ACHIEVABLE	RELEVANT	TIME-BOUND
Clearly define what you want to achieve.	Identify how success will be measured.	Set realistic goals based on available resources.	Ensure the goal supports your sustainability priorities.	Set a clear deadline for completion.
SMART GOAL FORMULA	I will [action] by [amount] within [timeframe] to achieve [sustainability objective].			
YOUR SMART GOAL FORMULA				
EXAMPLE	I will reduce electricity consumption by 10% within 12 months by installing LED lighting and improving energy monitoring.			

NOT SMART vs SMART EXAMPLES

NOT SMART		SMART
✗ Reduce energy use.	→	✓ Reduce electricity consumption by 10% within 12 months through the installation of LED lighting and energy-efficient equipment.
✗ Support local businesses.	→	✓ Increase spending with local suppliers to 50% of total procurement within the next tourism season.
✗ Improve visitor awareness.	→	✓ Provide sustainability information to 100% of visitors through pre-arrival emails and on-site signage by the start of next season.

CREATE YOUR OWN SMART GOAL

My Sustainability Goal:

How will I measure success?

Target completion date:

TIP: Review your goals regularly and celebrate progress along the way!



PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FRAMEWORK

Conclusion



Conclusion

A Framework For Action

The Practice Principles Framework has been developed to help tourism SMEs move from sustainability awareness to practical implementation and long-term transformation. It provides a practical and accessible pathway for translating sustainability principles into concrete actions that can be integrated into daily operations, strategic decision-making, and future business development.

The framework recognises that sustainability is no longer an optional consideration for tourism businesses. Environmental pressures, climate-related risks, changing visitor expectations, evolving policy requirements, and increasing demands for social responsibility are reshaping the context in which tourism SMEs operate. In this environment, sustainability must be understood not only as an environmental objective, but as a strategic approach that contributes to business resilience, competitiveness, and long-term viability.

While each principle addresses a specific aspect of sustainability, together they form an integrated framework that supports a more holistic vision of tourism development. The framework demonstrates that sustainability cannot be achieved through isolated actions or single interventions. Instead, it requires coordinated efforts across environmental, social, cultural, behavioural, and organisational dimensions.

Supporting the Environmental Transition

A significant part of the framework focuses on supporting the environmental transition of tourism SMEs, recognising that environmental quality, biodiversity, climate stability, and resource availability are fundamental conditions for the long-term viability of tourism destinations. The principles of Environmental Responsibility, Biodiversity and Natural Resources, Sustainable Resource Management, and Climate Action and Resilience collectively highlight the need to reduce environmental impacts while strengthening the capacity of businesses and destinations to adapt to emerging challenges.

These principles recognise that tourism both depends upon and affects natural systems. The quality of landscapes, ecosystems, biodiversity, water resources, and climatic conditions directly influences the attractiveness and viability of tourism destinations. At the same time, tourism activities can contribute to resource depletion, pollution, habitat degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions if not managed responsibly. The framework, therefore, encourages SMEs to adopt a more proactive and systematic approach to environmental management. This includes improving resource efficiency, reducing waste and emissions, protecting natural assets, integrating climate adaptation measures, and considering environmental impacts across the entire value chain. Importantly, these actions are not presented solely as environmental responsibilities; they are also opportunities to reduce operational costs, improve efficiency, strengthen business continuity, and respond to growing market expectations.

By integrating environmental responsibility into daily operations and long-term planning, tourism SMEs can contribute to more resilient destinations while safeguarding the natural resources on which their future success depends.

Strengthening Social and Cultural Sustainability

Sustainability in tourism extends beyond environmental considerations. The framework also highlights the importance of maintaining strong connections between tourism, local communities, and cultural heritage through the principles of Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion and Cultural Sustainability. Tourism can generate significant economic and social benefits for destinations, but these benefits are not always distributed equally. If local communities are excluded from decision-making processes or if cultural assets are treated merely as commercial products, tourism can contribute to social tensions, loss of identity, and reduced community support. Long-term sustainability, therefore, depends on ensuring that tourism development remains inclusive, participatory, and respectful of local realities.

The framework promotes approaches that empower local communities, support fair employment practices, encourage meaningful partnerships, and recognise the value of local knowledge and cultural diversity. It also emphasises the importance of protecting both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, ensuring that traditions, stories, practices, and identities continue to thrive alongside tourism development. By embedding social inclusion and cultural sustainability into tourism activities, SMEs can create more authentic visitor experiences, strengthen relationships with local stakeholders, and contribute to destinations that remain vibrant, distinctive, and resilient over time.

Enabling Behavioural and Organisational Change

The transition towards sustainability also requires changes in behaviours, attitudes, and organisational practices. This is reflected in the principles of Visitor Education and Engagement and Innovation and Green Transition Tools. Visitors play a central role in shaping the impacts of tourism. Their choices, behaviours, and interactions with destinations influence resource consumption, environmental quality, cultural preservation, and community wellbeing. For this reason, tourism SMEs have an important responsibility to inform, inspire, and engage visitors in more sustainable practices. Through interpretation, communication, storytelling, and participatory experiences, businesses can help transform visitors from passive consumers into active contributors to sustainability objectives.

At the same time, innovation and green transition tools provide the practical mechanisms needed to support this change. Digital technologies, data-driven decision-making, resource monitoring systems, renewable energy solutions, and new business models can help SMEs improve efficiency, measure progress, and identify new opportunities for sustainable growth. These principles highlight that sustainability is not only about managing impacts but also about fostering learning, innovation, collaboration, behavioural change and continuous improvement. They demonstrate that technological solutions are most effective when combined with informed and engaged people, both within businesses and among visitors.

From Incremental Improvements to Long-Term Transformation

A recurring message throughout the framework is that sustainability should be viewed as a journey rather than a fixed destination. Tourism SMEs operate under diverse conditions and often face limitations in terms of resources, time, expertise, and investment capacity. For this reason, the framework promotes a progressive and scalable approach that allows businesses to begin with achievable actions and gradually build more advanced sustainability practices over time. Many of the recommended actions can generate immediate benefits through improved efficiency, reduced costs, or enhanced visitor satisfaction. However, the framework also encourages SMEs to look beyond short-term improvements and consider how their business models may need to evolve in response to long-term environmental, social, and economic changes.

In particular, the increasing impacts of climate change, resource scarcity, demographic shifts, and changing consumer expectations highlight the importance of developing adaptive capacity and resilience. Businesses that are able to anticipate change, learn from experience, collaborate with stakeholders, and innovate continuously will be better positioned to thrive in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment. The framework, therefore, supports a progression from awareness and initial action towards adaptation, innovation, and ultimately transformation. This evolution is essential if tourism is to remain a positive force for destinations, communities, and future generations.

Final Reflection

The FOOTPRINT Practice Principles Framework is ultimately intended to support a tourism sector that is more sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and future-oriented. It provides tourism SMEs with practical guidance while recognising the complexity of the challenges they face and the diversity of contexts in which they operate. The principles demonstrate that sustainability is not the responsibility of a single actor or the result of a single intervention. It emerges from the collective efforts of businesses, visitors, communities, policymakers, and other stakeholders working towards shared objectives. Tourism SMEs, despite their size, have a particularly important role to play in this transition because of their close connection to destinations, communities, and visitors.

By progressively implementing these principles, tourism SMEs can contribute not only to reducing negative impacts but also to creating positive environmental, social, cultural, and economic value. In doing so, they help shape a tourism model that protects natural and cultural assets, strengthens local communities, supports innovation, and remains capable of responding to future challenges. The transition towards sustainability is an ongoing process, but it is also an opportunity to rethink how tourism creates value for businesses, communities, visitors, and destinations. Through commitment, collaboration, and continuous improvement, tourism SMEs can become key drivers of a tourism sector that is better prepared for the future and capable of generating lasting benefits for destinations, residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

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