50+ Sustainable Tourism Terms You Should Know

(and tips for talking about them)

Is it ecotourism or responsible tourism? What's the difference between green washing and green hushing? Why does it matter if a business has B Corps certification?

Any conversation about sustainability is filled with jargon … and that's especially true in the travel and tourism industry.

It's time to demystify all that terminology!

How to use this guide

It's pretty simple, actually. This guide is a go-to resource to help make sense of 50+ common words and phrases related to sustainable tourism. (Yes, even that murky term "sustainable tourism" is defined!)

It is incomplete but still quite robust. You'll find an A-to-Z collection of terms related to the environment, tourism supply chain, consumer behavior, and more. There's a lot here, and no one expects you to memorize all of this information. But as the industry evolves, it's important to understand what people are talking about.

As more terminology enters the tourism lexicon, future versions of this guide will be updated.

How to *actually* use this guide

I know what you're thinking: "If I don't know what these terms mean, how will I talk about them to other people?" That is an excellent question!

As important as it is to understand what these words and phrases mean, don't get too caught up with the technicalities. These words might be used in industry circles, but there are more user-friendly ways to talk about sustainable tourism with those who don't work in the sector.

Here are a few tips for making sustainable tourism — and all its words and phrases — more accessible in your communication:

- **Use tangible, accessible examples.** A lot of this terminology is intangible or a bit esoteric for most people. Talking about specific experiences or interactions that show these concepts in practice is far more memorable and impactful than just regurgitating a definition.

- **Tie the terms to non-travel-related events and news — and everyday life.** Connect with people through news and examples with which they are familiar. For example, climate change has negatively impacted the environment in many ways all around the world. Helping someone understand how the changes they see in their own backyard are connected to a destination halfway around the world is a powerful way to make sustainability issues more relevant and real.

- **Don't make travel elitist.** Not everyone you speak to is as knowledgeable as you are about sustainable travel and tourism. Becoming a more responsible traveler is a journey, and everyone is in a different place with that journey. Acknowledge and respect that, and find a shared connection within that.

- **Model behavior.** Don't just talk about actions related to these terms. Model that behavior so people can actually see sustainability in action. For example, instead of just rattling off the Leave No Trace tenets, show what they look like on a hike with travelers.

- **Invite diverse people to tell their stories.** People connect better when they're part of a dialogue. Use probing questions to learn more about experiences, questions, and confusion about sustainable tourism.

ACCESSIBILITY

The opportunity for everyone to enjoy travel experiences, regardless of age, financial status, or mental, emotional, or physical abilities. Ensuring accessibility is vital for inclusivity in travel.

ACCREDITATION

The process tourism companies go through to show they meet certain management and operation standards. Individuals can also receive accreditation to show they've mastered certain industry-specific skills and training.

ANIMAL WELFARE

How well an animal copes mentally and physically with the conditions in which it lives. In tourism, this means wildlife should be left wild. Additionally, travelers should not ride or touch animals.

BIODEGRADABLE

The ability of materials to break down into organic material, carbon dioxide, and water vapor, by organisms like bacteria and fungi, and return to nature. Biodegradable products are generally made from plant by-products like corn starch or sugarcane. This is different from **compostable** products, which break down into nutrient-rich products; compostable products also break down faster than biodegradable products.

BIODIVERSITY

The interaction between and among all of Earth's natural lifeforms (like trees, mammals, birds, moss, fish, and insects) and all of its natural ecosystems (like water sources, desert landscapes, mountains, and rainforests). This interaction creates the rich environment that allows plants and animals to flourish, and for people to live.

CARBON EMISSIONS

The release of carbon dioxide (CO_2) into the atmosphere. The term **greenhouse gas emissions** is synonymous with carbon emissions in everyday speech, but greenhouse gases also include water vapor (H_2O), methane (CH_4), nitrous oxide (N_2), and ozone (O_3), among other gases.

CARBON NEUTRALITY

The state in which carbon emissions released is balanced out through an equivalent amount of carbon removal. Carbon neutrality can also be achieved by eliminating carbon emissions altogether. This is also known as having a **net zero carbon footprint**.

CARBON OFFSETTING

The process of compensating for carbon emissions by participating in or funding a project that reduces greenhouse gas emissions. It is common for individuals to buy carbon offsets when they fly.

CERTIFIED B CORPORATIONS (B CORPS)

B Corps balance purpose and profit while meeting very high standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability. To achieve B Corps status, a company's entire business model is considered, including its social and environmental performance, its impact on workers and customers, charitable giving, employee benefits, and supply chain. Companies in 150 industries have achieved B Corps certification. Learn more about B Corps here.

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

An economic system designed to eliminate waste and encourage the continued use of resources. This is a closed-loop model where raw materials and products lose as little value as possible. It is an alternative to the current take-make-waste extractive model.

CITIZEN SCIENTIST

Average people (such as travelers) who participate in collecting data for conservation purposes.

CLIMATE POSITIVE

Activities that not only achieve net zero carbon missions but create an environmental benefit by removing additional carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

CODE OF CONDUCT

A set of guidelines outlining the principles, values, expectations, and responsibilities that are fundamental to how a business operates.

COMMUNITY TOURISM

Experiences that focus on the people in the destinations travelers visit. Community tourism prioritizes locals in the decision-making process and has a direct positive social and economic impact.

CONSERVATION

The care and protection of resources so they can continue to exist for future generations. In the environmental context, it refers to the projection of plants, animals, and natural areas. This is also known as **nature conservation**.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

A management concept in which companies integrate social and environmental issues into their business models. This looks different for each company but can include philanthropic participation, charitable giving, sponsorships, paid time off for employees to volunteer, participating in fair trade practices, and investing in environmental protection.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The legacy of tangible artifacts and intangible features that have shaped a shared community culture and have been passed down for many generations. Intangible cultural heritage includes customs, traditional practices, values, and rituals. Tangible cultural heritage includes movable cultural heritage (e.g. paintings, coins, manuscripts, etc.), immovable cultural heritage (e.g. monuments, archeological sites, etc.), and underwater cultural heritage (e.g. shipwrecks, etc.).

ECO-LODGE

To officially qualify as an eco-lodge, an accommodation facility must meet the following requirements, according to the International Ecolodge Guidelines:
1) It must be based in a natural environment.
2) It must benefit the local community.
3) It must offer programming for locals and guests.

In addition an eco-lodge must meet five of the following conditions:
1) Sustainable means must be used for water acquisition and consumption.
2) It uses a mindful system for waste and pollution disposal.
3) Energy needs are met through design and renewable energy sources.
4) It uses a mix of traditional and modern building design for greatest sustainability.
5) Construction requires minimal impact.
6) Its structure and landscaping fit the physical and cultural landscape.
7) It contributes to sustainable community development.

Eco-lodges generally have 60 or fewer rooms.

ECOTOURISM

Responsible travel to natural areas that promotes conservation, has a minimal environmental impact, and is socially and economically beneficial for local populations.

ECOSYSTEM

A geographic area where there are interactions between and among plant, animal, fungal, and micro-organism communities and the environments in which they exist. There are living parts and nonliving parts in an ecosystem. Living parts include things like animals, birds, and plants. Nonliving parts include elements like landscape and weather.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

The deterioration of the environment. This can happen in many different ways including the destruction of ecosystems or habitats, extinction of wildlife, depletion of natural resources, or reduction of biological diversity.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Consequences a community has on a natural environment due to its activities.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

Products, services, materials, and actions that do not harm the environment.

ETHICAL CONSUMERISM

Purchasing products that are not harmful to the environment or society.

EXPLOITATION

Treating someone or something poorly or unfairly in order to benefit from what is produced.

FAIR TRADE

The global movement that promotes more equitable, transparent trading partnerships that moves the payment of higher prices to exporters. This improves social and environmental standards for producers.

FLIGHT SHAMING

Flygskam in Swedish. The social movement born in 2017 that encouraged people not to fly.

FOOTPRINT

Impact of human activities, generally on the natural environment.

GEOTOURISM

Tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place, including the environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and wellbeing of residents. It is environmentally and culturally responsible, and brings together all the aspects of a place's geographical character to create an experience richer than each individual element.

GEOTAGGING

A feature that lets users mark a geographic location on images shared through social media platforms. When something is geotagged, other people can accurately identify where a photo was taken.

GREEN HUSHING

Downplaying or under communicating environmental credentials or sustainability practices. This is the opposite of green washing.

GREEN WASHING

Exaggerating environmental credentials or sustainability practices. This is the opposite of green hushing.

HOMESTAY

Accommodations for travelers in a local resident's home. This immersive experience should have a direct economic benefit to the host and/or local community.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

This refers to the original people of a place. The United Nations recognizes them as "inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment." There are more than 370 million Indigenous people around the world.

INVISIBLE BURDEN

The unaccounted-for destination costs to provide local infrastructure and protect environmental and socio-cultural systems for tourists and local people. *Destinations at Risk: The Invisible Burden of Tourism* provides a thorough outline of these "hidden" costs.

LEAVE NO TRACE

The concept of leaving a minimal impact in natural environments and recreational settings. The Center for Outdoor Ethics outlines seven leave no trace principles:
1) Plan ahead and prepare.
2) Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
3) Dispose of waste properly.
4) Leave what you find.
5) Minimize campfire impacts
6) Respect wildlife.
7) Be considerate of other visitors.

MASS TOURISM

A large number of tourists all going to the same place at the same time.

MICROPLASTICS

Pieces of plastic pollution less than five millimeters long that are harmful to the environment.

MINIMAL IMPACT PRACTICES

Intentional behaviors or actions that reduce damage to the environment.

NATURAL HERITAGE

Naturally occurring features like physical, geological, and biological formations or groups of formations that have scientific, historic, social, or aesthetic value.

NATURE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism that specifically focuses on protecting natural areas. This is also known as **nature-based tourism**.

OVERTOURISM

An excessive and unchecked growth of visitors in a destination that negatively and permanently impacts local residents. **Mass tourism** can lead to overtourism conditions.

REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Creating the conditions for a destination to renew itself and flourish through tourism. Essentially leaving a place better than how it is found.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Any form of tourism that can be consumed in a more responsible way with a focus on individual people and destinations. It involves consciously making decisions and taking action to foster a positive interaction between the tourism industry and host destinations. For example, it includes minimizing destructive environmental and socio-cultural impacts, creating respect between tourists and residents, generating economic benefits for local communities, and positively contributing to protecting natural and cultural heritage. This term is synonymous with **ethical tourism**. It is often used interchangeably with **sustainable tourism**, but there is a difference. Responsible tourism is about taking meaningful action to make tourism sustainable.

RESTORATION

Returning a natural habitat to its original state. This is done in many ways, including repairing environmental degradation, removing introduced species, and replanting native plants and vegetation.

SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

Products made from fossil fuels that are meant to be used once and then disposed of right away. These include bottles, straws, bags, and wrappers. Single-use plastics are also known as **disposable plastics**.

SLOW TRAVEL

A rejection of the traditional tourism model, slow travel is a mindset and interest in more intimately getting to know a destination. It emphasizes experiencing the local culture, spending more time in a single area, and more thoughtfully slowing down the travel process.

SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES)

Small businesses that generally have fewer than 250 people, though this officially varies by country. According to the United Nations, these businesses make up 90% of all businesses in the world.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Organizations that address an unmet need or solve a social or environmental problem (like wildlife trafficking or lack of access to clean water) through a business model that maximizes profits while maximizing benefits to society and the environment. Social enterprises are also known as **social businesses**.

SOCIAL IMPACT

The effect an organization's actions (or inactions), activities, projects, programs, or policies have on the wellbeing of people and communities. It may also be used to describe a significant, positive impact on a pressing social challenge.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Development carried out in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, the SDGs outline 17 integrated goals that are designed to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. An affiliated pledge called Leave No One Behind emphasizes fast-tracking progress for those countries that are furthest behind in meeting the goals. Read more about each of the 17 SDGs here, and learn more about tourism's role in achieving the SDGs here.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

This is a macro-level concept that considers the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism. It addresses the needs of visitors, the environment, host communities, and the industry. This refers to actions taken by stakeholders and political leaders to improve the industry so that it remains economically viable as an industry and has socio-economic benefits to all participants that are fairly distributed and contribute to poverty alleviation. Sustainable tourism isn't a type of tourism; it is the goal.

SUSTAINABILITY

The ability for something to be maintained at a certain rate or level. It focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

TOURISM ASSET

Something that has an economic benefit to the tourism industry, such as sandy beaches, accessible transportation, etc.

TOURISM CARRYING CAPACITY

The maximum number of people that can visit a tourist destination at the same time without causing destruction to the physical, economic, and socio-cultural environment, and without decreasing the quality of a visitors' experience. This measurement is now considered outdated and flawed because destinations and circumstances are constantly in flux and difficult to predict.

TOURISM LEAKAGE

The phenomenon when a vast majority of tourism revenue does not remain in the local economy where a traveler visits and, therefore, does not benefit local residents. Tourism leakage tends to happen when travelers stay in and spend money at internationally owned accommodations and businesses. This is why it is important for travelers to support local businesses.

TOURISM PLEDGE

Guidelines defined by a destination that specifically outline how visitors are expected to act. Most tourism pledges are not mandatory or enforceable. Their effectiveness is largely dependent on the support destinations give tourism businesses to become ambassadors for engaging travelers in compliance.

TRAIL TOURISM

A form of slow travel where people walk or hike on established trails as a form of exploring a destination. Trail tourism is a sustainable model for tourism because it leads people out of more heavily visited areas, infuses financial resources across a wider range of local businesses, and has a minimal environmental impact.

TRAIN BRAGGING

Tågskryt in Swedish. This is the response by those who choose to travel by train rather than fly.

UNTOURISM

A tourism trend driven by local people sharing their local experiences with travelers, generally in urban settings. These experiences specifically do not include attractions that are considered "must-see" sites.

VOLUNTOURISM

A form of travel where people volunteer on projects that give back to a community. Special care should be given when considering voluntourism projects as some do more harm than good for local communities.

WILDLIFE TOURISM

Trips to destinations where the primary focus is on observing and interacting with local animals in their natural environments.

ZERO WASTE

A philosophy that guides practices to prevent trash production and elimination. The goal is to make every effort to reduce and reuse products, packaging, and materials so nothing is discharged in landfills, water, or air.

Understanding what words and phrases mean is important, but how we use them is an entirely different situation.

Words and actions matter. Our words, images, editorial decisions, and social media posts carry weight. Every choice you make with your public-facing content makes a difference — especially in the travel industry.

What you include and exclude, the words and images you choose, the point of view you use, the voices you seek out and stories you amplify, the content structure you select — *it all makes a difference*.

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Rooted is a solutions platform at the intersection of sustainable tourism, storytelling, and social impact.

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