

# 70+ Sustainable Tourism Terms You Should Know

(and tips for talking about them)



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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 70+ 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.

This guide is updated periodically with additional terminology, so download new versions as they become available.



# 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.

**Acculturation:** A cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture. In the tourism context, cultures may clash and local residents adopt new behaviors by imitating what they see and learn from tourists.

**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<sub>2</sub>) into the atmosphere. The term **greenhouse gas emissions** is synonymous with carbon emissions in everyday speech, but greenhouse gases also include water vapor (H<sub>2</sub>O), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>), and ozone (O<sub>3</sub>), among other gases.

**Carbon Label:** Similar to the labels found on food packaging, these have details about carbon emissions and occasionally other supply chain information related to a specific product or service.

**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 are businesses that 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:** In 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 protection 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.).

**Decarbonization:** The process of reducing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions resulting from human activity in the atmosphere.

**De-Center:** Intentionally removing attention away from what a specific person wants, needs, desires, thinks, believes, and expects. The de-centering process for an individual in the tourism context means becoming aware of yourself, your actions, and your presence in a certain place and time; realizing your presence has an impact on the environment, people, and culture; and being intentional with actions, interactions, and encounters.

**Drawdown:** The point in the future when levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere stop climbing and start to decline, thereby preventing catastrophic climate change steadily – as quickly, safely, and equitably as possible. Learn more about solutions and actions that exist to reach drawdown [here](#).

**Eco-Lodge:** Accommodations that generally meet the following criteria:

1. A symbiotic relationship with the natural environment.
2. Embraces ecological sustainability.
3. Has a proven contribution to local conservation efforts.
4. Investment in environmental training programs and/or education.
5. Incorporation of local cultural considerations.
6. Provides an economic return to the local community.

Eco-lodges tend to be based in jungle or naturally abundant areas. They often have less than 30 rooms, which means they have a minimal environmental impact compared to other accommodations.

**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:** Intentionally purchasing products that are not harmful to the environment or society. This is sometimes also known as **conscious consumerism**.

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

**Intention-Behavior Gap:** The failure to translate intention into action. It is the phenomenon that occurs when a person knows something or holds certain personal values but fails to act. This is similar to the **knowledge-action gap** or the **value-action gap**.

**Invisible Burdens:** 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.

**Land Acknowledgement:** A formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as the traditional stewards of the land and the enduring relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories. This is also known as a **territorial acknowledgement**.

**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.

**Local Washing:** Using clever or manipulative language or tactics to convince people that services or products legitimately support and benefit local communities and the people who live there when that is not the case.

**Mass Tourism:** A large number of tourists all going to the same place at the same time.

**Microfinance:** Credit offered in the form of small loans. It is usually provided to low-income individuals or groups.

**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 or a community.



**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 or disparity under one of three conditions:

1. The volume of tourism activity and the capacity of the host destination.
2. The type of tourism activity and local capacity.
3. Traveler behavior and local social norms.

Contrary to popular belief, it does not take crowds to generate an overtourism problem, though mass tourism can lead to overtourism conditions.

**Psychological Distancing:** Creating a mental distance and taking on the perspective of an impartial and objective observer. In an environmental context, when people have created psychological distance from nature and feel less connected to it, they do less to protect it.

**Regeneration:** Creating the conditions for a place to renew itself and flourish. In the tourism context, this is done when travel is the vehicle used to encourage this renewal and restoration process.

Ultimately, it means the presence of tourism leaves 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.

**Revenge Tourism:** The pent-up desire to make up for lost time and catch up on missed travel experiences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdown.

**Rewilding:** An approach to environmental conservation and ecological restoration that lets nature repair and take care of itself. It emphasizes natural processes to restore degradation, ultimately increasing biodiversity and creating sustainable environments.

**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 Aviation Fuel:** A biofuel created from sustainable feedstocks used to power aircraft that has similar properties as conventional jet fuel but with a smaller carbon footprint.

**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 Gentrification:** The process of socio-spatial change in which neighborhoods are transformed to meet the needs and tastes of travelers. "Gentrification" is when older urban neighborhoods, which are normally home to lower-income residents and businesses, are displaced by higher-income classes. "Tourism gentrification" is when travelers are a root cause of this transformation and displacement.

**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.



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

Founded by JoAnna Haugen, Rooted's mission is to responsibly document, support, celebrate, and share sustainable travel-related initiatives that prioritize local communities and the planet – and to help others do the same.

Join Rooted on a journey of empowerment and amplification, where local people plant the seeds and storytelling helps them grow.

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