

SUSTAINABILITY INSIGHTS REPORT

Fall 2024 Industry Exchange

Developed as part of the RT03 Sustainable
Tourism Learning Series

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Letter from the Destination Sustainability Officer

This report seeks to provide valuable insights that will guide and inspire the collective efforts of our region toward a more sustainable future.

Our purpose here is clear: To offer you a detailed analysis of the information shared at our Fall 2024 Industry Exchange. These insights are intended not only to raise awareness of sustainability within the tourism industry but also to highlight the importance of collaboration across diverse stakeholders, including local businesses, environmental organizations, and tourism professionals.

Through this document, we aim to foster an environment where knowledge and best practices can be exchanged freely, helping us all advance the efforts of sustainable tourism. By sharing valuable resources and illustrating current and future sustainability initiatives, we hope to encourage industry-wide adoption of these principles, ensuring that our tourism practices are aligned with the needs of our planet and future generations.

We recognize that the journey toward sustainability is ongoing, and through future exchanges, webinars, and training opportunities, we will continue to build a roadmap for sustainable tourism development. This journey requires not only the commitment of industry leaders but also the active participation of all stakeholders in education and knowledge-sharing. As you read through this document, I hope you are inspired by the opportunities and resources available to us. Together, we can drive real change and create a more sustainable tourism sector that benefits both our local communities and the environment.

Hamid Dwyer, Destination Sustainability Officer
RT03 Hamilton Halton Brant

Event Summary

The Fall Industry Exchange - November 13th, 2024

The Fall Industry Exchange was held with the goal of advancing sustainability within the regional tourism sector. Organized by Hamilton Halton Brant Regional Tourism Association, the exchange served as a platform for tourism industry stakeholders to share knowledge, discuss challenges, and collaborate on solutions for integrating sustainability into their organizations. The exchange included professionals from various sectors, including environmental organizations, local businesses, and government bodies. This whitepaper summarizes the key highlights, discussions, and initiatives that emerged from the exchange, along with a roadmap for future actions in sustainable tourism development.



Introduction to Insights

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries. As global awareness of environmental and social issues increases, there is a growing emphasis on sustainability within the tourism sector. The Fall 2024 Industry Exchange was organized to address these challenges and to create opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders. With sustainability in the tourism industry as its central theme, the exchange aimed to create a shared understanding of sustainability practices across the region and provide a platform for actionable strategies and best practices that could be implemented across the tourism industry.

Key Themes

Sustainability as a Core Value: There was a consensus among industry stakeholders that sustainability must be integrated into the core operations of tourism businesses. This involves addressing environmental impacts, fostering community involvement, and ensuring that tourism benefits local communities while preserving natural resources.

Collaboration is Key: Stakeholders underscored the importance of collaboration among businesses, government bodies, environmental organizations, and the community. By working together, stakeholders can share best practices, overcome challenges, and enhance the impact of sustainability initiatives.

Certification and Standards: Certification programs like GreenStep are helpful for providing a structured approach to sustainability. Achieving certifications was seen by some as an important milestone, with organizations aiming to progress towards higher levels of certification.

Education and Training: Ongoing education and training are essential for ensuring that tourism professionals have the tools and knowledge to implement sustainable practices. The Sustainable Tourism Learning Series is a practical initiative designed to support tourism businesses in their sustainability journeys.

Insights on Destination Sustainability and Sustainable Tourism

Defining Sustainability In Tourism

The responses provide a broad range of terms that encompass the concept of sustainability in tourism. The most frequently cited terms were:

Long-Term Focus

Words like "future," "long-term," and "generations" signified a forward-thinking approach to sustainability, emphasizing the importance of ensuring the sustainability of resources for future generations. There was a clear preference for strategies that transcend short-term goals in favor of enduring solutions.

Responsibility

Terms such as "responsibility," "stewardship," "care," and "respect" underscored the importance of ethical management practices that consider both human and environmental needs. These values reflect the role of tourism operators as stewards of the destinations and ecosystems they work within.

Equity

Respondents highlighted the need for balance, not only in the environmental aspect (e.g., "low impact," "green," "eco-friendly") but also in balancing economic and social interests. This notion of balance reflected the pursuit of equitable outcomes for local communities, visitors, and businesses alike.

Environment

There is a noticeable trend towards environmental priorities, with terms like "environment", "conservation", "eco-friendly", and "clean energy" frequently emerged. This indicates that sustainability efforts in tourism are heavily rooted in minimizing environmental harm and advancing green technologies and practices.

Prosperity

Interestingly, terms like "growth," "prosperity," and "financial success" highlight that sustainability is not seen as incompatible with economic viability. The idea of "regenerative" tourism emerged, suggesting that economic growth should be part of a broader effort to restore and sustain the environment.

Sustainability Challenges

In addition to broader industry-wide concerns, responses illuminated specific internal challenges that tourism organizations face when trying to embrace sustainability

Financial Security and ROI

Respondents noted that financial security remains one of the biggest hurdles. The uncertainty of achieving a return on investment (ROI) from sustainability initiatives can make organizations hesitant to fully commit. Similarly, there was concern about the long-term sustainability of these initiatives, particularly in regions with "limited resources" and "budget stresses."

Lack of Framework

Many responses cited "lack of direction" and insufficient infrastructure as barriers to progress. The absence of clear frameworks or roadmaps for organizations and businesses makes it difficult to plan and execute sustainability strategies. Further, a lack of political will and inadequate public infrastructure to support sustainability were identified as key obstacles.

Knowledge and Education

A clear knowledge gap was highlighted, with responses indicating that organizations often lack the expertise or resources to properly apply sustainable practices. The overwhelming amount of information and confusion about how to practically implement sustainability principles led to a sense of inertia in many organizations.

More Sustainability Challenges

Over-Tourism

Over-tourism remains a serious challenge, with concerns about its impact on local communities and ecosystems. There were numerous mentions of "ecosystem preservation" as a critical issue, emphasizing the need for sustainable visitor management strategies.

Stakeholder Buy-in

A recurring theme was the challenge of securing buy-in from key stakeholders, such as businesses, local communities, and government entities. Building partnerships and fostering collaboration was seen as vital for the success of sustainability initiatives, but this remains difficult due to "political impacts" and "lack of community buy-in."



Core Values for Operating with Purpose

The tourism industry is recognizing the growing importance of aligning business operations with purpose-driven values. In an exercise with local businesses and regional tourism leaders, a variety of core values emerged, reflecting a collective commitment to sustainability, inclusivity, community engagement, and ethical practices. This section analyzes the responses from the tourism professionals, focusing on the most frequently mentioned core values, and discusses their significance in the context of purposeful business operations wherein a business is aligned with their stated organizational values.

By understanding and embracing these values, tourism businesses can foster long-term success while creating positive social, environmental, and economic impacts. Tourism professionals recognized the need for core values that align business practices with sustainability, equity, and community welfare. This analysis explores the core values identified by tourism professionals, emphasizing the most frequent responses and their implications for creating a meaningful, responsible tourism business.

Analysis of Core Values for Operating with Purpose

The survey responses reveal a clear alignment with values that foster collaboration, inclusivity, and community engagement. **Collaboration** emerged as the most frequently cited value, reflecting the belief that the tourism industry thrives when stakeholders—whether employees, business partners, or local communities—work together. Next, it was identified that by **educating**, sharing knowledge, resources, and best practices, tourism businesses can create innovative and sustainable solutions, ensuring the success of both the business and the wider community.

Closely related to collaboration was the emphasis on **community**. Tourism professionals recognized the crucial role of local communities in shaping tourism experiences, ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably and contribute to the social, cultural, and economic well-being of residents. This value also tied into the broader desire for **inclusivity**, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background or ability, can access and enjoy tourism experiences. The emphasis on inclusivity reflected a shift toward creating welcoming, diverse environments where visitors and locals alike can thrive.

Values such as **equity, fairness, and accessibility** further highlighted the group's commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for all stakeholders, especially marginalized or underserved groups. These values were seen as central to creating a tourism industry that is not only profitable but also just and responsible. The focus on equity ensures that tourism benefits are distributed fairly, while accessibility aims to remove barriers to participation, allowing all people to engage with tourism, regardless of socioeconomic status, ability, or other factors.

Integrity, trust, and respect emerge as foundational values for responsible business practices. Tourism professionals understand that these values are essential for building lasting relationships with customers, local communities, and business partners.

Analysis of Core Values for Operating with Purpose

Another common thread among the core values was the **importance of environmental and social responsibility**. The principle of "**leave-no-trace**" emphasized minimizing the ecological footprint of tourism, while **stewardship** highlighted the responsible management of natural and cultural resources. These values underscored the growing recognition that sustainable practices are not just a trend but a necessary shift for the future of the industry. Additionally, values such as intentionality and thoughtfulness in business and product development, while promoting healthy work culture emphasized the desire for businesses to prioritize well-being and respect for both internal and external entities.

Growth, innovation, and transformation reflected the dynamic nature of the tourism industry, with professionals acknowledging the need for continuous improvement and adaptability. Tourism businesses were compelled to innovate, embrace new technologies, and evolve to meet changing consumer demands, all while maintaining their commitment to sustainability and ethical practices. The value of growth, for them, is not just about business expansion but also about fostering personal and community development, ensuring that progress is shared and beneficial for all.

Finally, the values of **authenticity, optimism, and good-mind** reinforced the industry's commitment to genuine, positive experiences. Authenticity ensures that tourism offerings reflect the true essence of a destination, while optimism drives forward-thinking strategies and solutions. A "good-mind" approach, characterized by open-mindedness, positivity, and respect for others, fosters a healthy, supportive work culture, enhancing both employee and customer experiences.

Becoming More Purpose Driven

As part of Dr. Sonya Graci's exercise, participants were given time to answer this question: What can you do to become a purpose driven organization and cultivate sustainability champions? Each group was asked to discuss among each other before writing and sharing their thoughts and ideas.

The responses to the question about becoming a purpose-driven organization and cultivating sustainability champions reflect a broad, multifaceted approach to fostering sustainability. Key insights can be organized around several central themes described in the next section.

Ways to Become More Purpose Driven

Education and Professional Development

Workforce Education

A strong emphasis on education and training was prevalent throughout the responses. There was a focus on breaking down sustainability into manageable topics, offering professional development, and empowering both staff and the broader public. References to forward motion seminars, staff engagement, and internal education reflects the group's priority of building a knowledgeable workforce that can become better ambassadors of sustainability.

Sustainability Champions

Respondents highlighted the importance of recognizing those who excel in sustainability efforts (both individuals and organizations) and sharing their success stories. This was explained as a way to inspire others to follow suit and encourages a culture of peer learning. Within an organization, sustainability champions can influence the organizational culture and behavior of their organization.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Inclusivity and Collaboration

A recurring theme was the importance of involving diverse stakeholders—local businesses, indigenous tourism operators, marginalized groups, and the broader community. Creating partnerships, gathering feedback from the community, and actively engaging in conversations about sustainability were viewed as key to cultivating a culture of sustainability.

Feedback and Participation

Many responses emphasized the need to gather feedback from the community and partners, ensuring that sustainability initiatives are not only top-down but also informed by grassroots input. Encouraging participation through incentives or providing clear reasons for stakeholders to get involved was also seen as crucial.

More Ways to Become Purpose Driven

Communication and Transparency

Shining a Light on Successes

There was a significant emphasis on celebrating and communicating results, which both inspires others and highlights tangible progress. The idea of showcasing sustainable organizations and initiatives (e.g., 'buy local' guides or sustainability champions) can amplify successful efforts and share best practices.

Clear and Digestible Messaging

Respondents suggested breaking down complex sustainability topics into accessible formats for various audiences, from staff to tourists. Clear communication of results and initiatives, especially in ways that resonate with the public, was seen as key to fostering greater engagement.

Principled Decision Making

Sustainability as a Core Value

A consistent thread throughout the responses was the integration of sustainability into strategic planning and decision-making processes. Whether it's through a value lens or principled sourcing (such as supporting local, sustainable suppliers or marginalized groups), organizations must be urged to align their operations with sustainable values. This also includes aspiring for manageable growth and fostering a culture that values new ideas.

Circular Economy

Some responses directly referenced creating a cyclical, circular system where waste and resources are minimized, contributing to long-term sustainability. Practices like zero waste stations, local ingredient sourcing, and sustainable farming (e.g., honeybees, tree planting) were presented as examples of how businesses can model sustainable behavior.

More Ways to Become Purpose Driven

Leadership and Example Setting

Inspirational Leadership

Leaders were encouraged to create an organizational culture based on principles like trust, partnership, and passion. Inspiring staff, stakeholders, and the public to engage in sustainability requires a genuine, transparent, and compassionate approach.

Leading by Example

A recurring sentiment was the importance of organizational leadership in sustainability efforts. Organizations set the tone for the workforce, the community, and even competitors to follow. This can include everything from small day-to-day actions to broader advocacy for environmental causes.

Inclusivity and Equity

Social Responsibility and Inclusivity

Many responses called for a strong focus on inclusivity, whether it is in the workforce, through the engagement of marginalized groups, or by supporting women regionally and nationally. Sustainability was seen not just as an environmental issue but as a social one, calling for fair opportunities and partnerships across all levels of society.



More Ways to Become Purpose Driven

Measurable Goals and Accountability

Climate Action and Reporting

Several responses touched on the importance of having a formalized approach to sustainability, such as developing a climate action plan, setting measurable goals, and ensuring transparency in reporting results. This accountability helps organizations track progress, celebrate milestones, and refine strategies for future success.

Employee Engagement

Formalizing sustainability initiatives for employee engagement—possibly through performance metrics, incentives, or recognition programs—was seen as a practical step toward creating long-term sustainability champions within an organization.



More Ways to Become Purpose Driven

Practical Sustainability Initiatives

Sustainable Operations and Green Practices

Several responses mention practical sustainability practices, such as organic farming, zero-waste stations, or nature trails. These efforts not only promote environmental stewardship but also connect the organization more deeply with its community and its ecological footprint.



Celebrating Progress and Small Successes

Recognizing Achievements

Emphasis was placed on celebrating both small and large sustainability successes. Recognizing progress, whether internally (among staff) or externally (in the community), builds momentum and encourages further action. For instance, initiatives like butterfly gardens, tree planting, and public tours are celebrated as steps toward greater sustainability.

A Purpose Driven Future, Inspired by Sustainability Champions

This document suggests that becoming a purpose-driven organization and cultivating sustainability champions in the tourism sector is not a one-dimensional task but rather a dynamic, holistic effort. Key factors include education, community engagement, principled decision-making, clear communication, leadership, inclusivity, and practical sustainability initiatives. It is clear that a multi-layered approach – one that combines actionable steps, measurable goals, and strong leadership – is essential for promoting sustainable tourism practices and inspiring long-term change.

We must adopt this approach together. As a region we can drive real change and create a more sustainable tourism sector that benefits both our local communities and the environment.

For more information about the Sustainable Tourism Learning Series and other sustainability reports visit the STLS Linktree below



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