



Regional Destination Sustainability

STRATEGY

This roadmap represents the evolution of RTO3's Regional Strategy, integrating the outcomes of the Destination Sustainability Action Plan and charting a forward-looking path toward 2030 for our region.

Table of Contents

Letter from the Executive Director	03
Land Acknowledgement	04
Section 1: Foundations	06
Section 2: Shared Language and Values	16
Section 3: Regional Context	21
Section 4: Moving Forward	25
Section 5: Metrics and Evaluation	27
Section 6: Future Ready	30
Section 7: Conclusion	32

Letter from the Executive Director

Tourism in Hamilton, Halton, and Brant is evolving – and so is the way we define success. Today, sustainability, community wellbeing, and environmental responsibility are not just aspirations; they are the foundation of a competitive and credible destination.

Over the past two years, our region has made remarkable progress: from achieving GreenStep Bronze certification and establishing the Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Committee (DSSC) to delivering regional learning programs and industry exchanges. These collective efforts have shaped a strong foundation for what comes next.

I am pleased to share the RTO3 Destination Sustainability Strategy 2025–2030, which reflects the input, experience, and leadership of partners across our region. This is a strategy that was worked on collaboratively with all the regional destinations in RTO3 and will continue to be implemented collaboratively. The Strategy is a shared regional framework designed to bring consistency, alignment, and accountability to how we approach destination sustainability together.

Our goal is simple but ambitious: to ensure that wherever visitors go in Hamilton, Halton, and Brant, they encounter a shared commitment to responsible travel, community respect, and environmental stewardship.

I invite you to review the strategy and join us in building a consistent, collaborative approach to destination sustainability. Together, we can ensure that our region continues to be a leader in responsible tourism and a destination that thrives socially, environmentally, and economically – for generations to come.

Warm regards,
Maria Fortunato
Executive Director
Regional Tourism Organization 3 (RTO3)
Hamilton | Halton | Brant

Land Acknowledgement

The land which RTO3-Hamilton Halton Brant represents, forms part of the traditional territory of the Wendat Confederacy, the Attiwandaron Confederacy, the Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, including Six Nations of the Grand River made up of the Onondowahgah (Seneca), Guyohkohnyoh (Cayuga), Onundagaono (Onondaga), Onayotekaono (Oneida), Kanienkahagen (Mohawk), and the Ska-Ruh-Reh (Tuscarora) Nations. The land is part of the Dish with One Spoon (1100) agreed upon by many Indigenous nations around the Great Lakes to share the land and resources. It was later referenced at the signing of the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701 between New France and multiple First Nations to end 100 years of war. Finally, the land is part of the Métis Nation of Ontario's Region 8 and 9, including the Credit River Métis Council, and the Clear Waters Métis Council.

We thank all Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations, for their continued care for and stewardship of the lands, waters, creatures, and peoples since time immemorial. Without this continued multigenerational effort, the land which RTO3-Hamilton Halton Brant represents, would not be a place to live, work, play, and visit, as it is to millions of people from all over the globe today. We look forward to seeing Indigenous tourism continue to grow and thrive in our region and beyond and look forward to continuing to grow our relationship with our Indigenous partners. We encourage all our stakeholders to continue to learn about Indigenous peoples, their communities, and their major contributions to our society, including within tourism.

At a Glance

PURPOSE

The purpose of the RTO3 Destination Sustainability Strategy 2025 is to establish a coordinated regional framework for embedding environmental, social, and economic sustainability across the tourism ecosystem of Hamilton, Halton, and Brant. This strategy operationalizes the outcomes of the Destination Sustainability Action Plan (DSAP) and provides the governance, focus areas, and metrics needed to guide implementation toward 2030.

It serves as both a guiding document and an accountability mechanism, aligning RTO3's programs, partnerships, and investments with global sustainability standards, provincial initiatives, and local priorities. Through this strategy, RTO3 commits to advancing stewardship, equity, and climate action in collaboration with its partners, ensuring that tourism contributes positively to community wellbeing, environmental protection, and regional competitiveness.

The RTO3 Destination Sustainability Strategy 2025 builds on several years of foundational work, including GreenStep Bronze certification, the creation of the Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Committee (DSSC), and implementation of the 3-year Destination Sustainability Action Plan. This strategy provides the next stage of RTO3's sustainability journey, moving from planning to measurable impact.

Structured around six strategic focus areas – regenerative tourism, stakeholder engagement, social responsibility, Indigenous collaboration, data-informed decision-making, and provincial alignment – the strategy defines a pathway for integrating sustainability into all aspects of regional tourism management.

It outlines key achievements to date, identifies mechanisms for governance and data collection, and establishes a metrics framework for tracking environmental, socio-economic, and visitor experience outcomes. By aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Ontario's Forward Motion playbook, this document positions Hamilton Halton Brant as a leader in responsible tourism.

Ultimately, this strategy provides a clear call to action: to embed sustainability as a defining feature of RTO3's regional identity, ensuring tourism strengthens community resilience, enhances natural and cultural assets, and delivers lasting value for residents and visitors alike.

SECTION 1

Foundations

RTO3 REGIONAL TOURISM STRATEGY

Tourism is one of the most powerful ways that visitors connect with Hamilton Halton and Brant regions. Our region's landscapes, communities, and cultural stories are at the heart of why people choose to visit. But with this opportunity comes responsibility to ensure that tourism enhances our communities, protects our environment, and sustains the values that make RTO3 a unique destination.

The Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability is designed as a practical guide for embedding sustainability, stewardship, and responsibility into the tourism ecosystem of Hamilton Halton Brant. It provides our partners, operators, and communities with a shared framework for moving forward together, ensuring that tourism remains a force for good across the region.

This strategy recognizes that sustainability is no longer a niche expectation, it is central to the resilience, competitiveness, and credibility of destinations worldwide. By aligning with destination sustainability principles, RTO3 can strengthen the region's visitor experiences, protect natural and cultural assets, and deliver long-term value to the people who live, work, and travel here.

Destination sustainability is a core priority within RTO3's Regional Tourism Strategy, specifically under Area of Focus C: Ecosystem Development and Value Co-Creation. The area emphasizes collaboration with regional partners and stakeholders to ensure that tourism maximizes its positive contributions to the Hamilton Halton Brant region. To achieve this, RTO3 is committed to strengthening collective understanding and appreciation of sustainable practices while mobilizing joint action in support of responsible destination development.

Actions include:

- Action #13: Establish a shared understanding of sustainable tourism across the region.
 - Outcomes: Shared definitions of economic, social, and environmental sustainability in tourism.
 - KPIs: Number and type of stakeholders engaged; development of regional sustainability principles.
- Action #14: Gather and share sustainability and stewardship resources with stakeholders.
 - Outcomes: Increased awareness, understanding, and action connecting tourism development with environmental and social sustainability.
 - KPIs: Volume and diversity of resources shared; new sustainability resources created for the region.

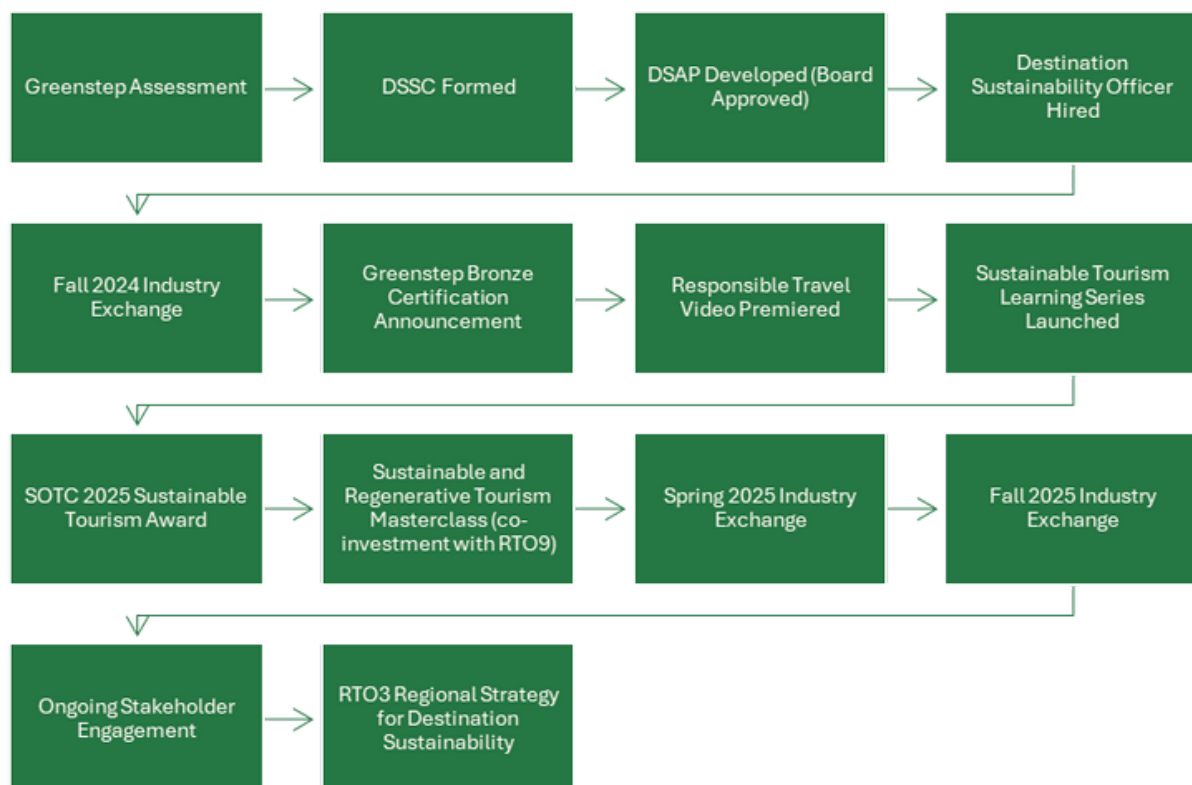
These actions establish the foundation for collaborative progress. They signal that the region's sustainability journey is not just about certification or branding, it is about cultivating a regional culture of stewardship and shared accountability.

INVESTMENT

Over the past two years, RT03 has laid important groundwork toward developing Hamilton Halton and Brant into an environmentally sustainable destination. Key milestones include:

- GreenStep Destination Assessment (2024): Provides a baseline of strengths and gaps against global destination sustainability standards.
- Formation of the Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Committee (DSSC)
- Development and endorsement of the Regional Destination Sustainability Action Plan (DSAP) by the RT03 Board
- Hiring of Destination Sustainability Officer (2024-2025) - brought in environmental sustainability expertise to lead initiatives and develop resources
- Fall 2024 Industry Exchange (November 13th): Keynote – Dr. Sonya Graci, Toronto Metropolitan University
- Greenstep Bronze Certification Announcement
- Responsible Travel Video (2024): A visitor-facing campaign introducing the concept of travelling responsibly in Hamilton Halton Brant.

- Sustainable Tourism Learning Series (2024): An educational initiative that equipped operators and stakeholders with knowledge and tools to integrate sustainability into their businesses – including regular sustainability spotlights on social media.
- Administered a Regional Sustainability Stakeholder Survey (2024).
- SOTC March 3rd to 5th – Sustainable Tourism Awards Program: Recognizes and celebrates operators demonstrating excellence, innovation, and leadership in sustainability. Summit Station Dairy & Creamery won the 2024 award for their sustainable agricultural tourism efforts.
- Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism Masterclass (co-investment with RTO9).
- Spring 2025 Industry Exchange (April 23rd): Keynote – David Adames, Niagara Parks Commission.
- Fall 2025 Industry Exchange (November 12th): Keynote – Natalie Lowe, The Sustainable Events Forum.
- Stakeholder Engagement (Ongoing): Efforts to capture the needs, priorities, and readiness of the tourism industry for sustainability action.
- RTO3 Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability.



THE 3-YEAR DESTINATION SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN

Foundation and Purpose

In 2024, the Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Committee (DSSC) was established to guide the region toward a more regenerative, responsible, and sustainable tourism system. Together with the RTO3 Board of Directors, the DSSC approved the Destination Sustainability Action Plan (DSAP) in June 2024, providing a structured, stakeholder-driven roadmap for sustainable destination management. This plan, now embedded within the Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability (2024–2027), connects strategic intent with implementation, bridging the Board’s policy direction, the DSAP framework, and annual business planning.

The strategy outlines RTO3’s approach to advancing destination sustainability as both a guiding framework and an operational commitment. It ensures that RTO3’s sustainability efforts evolve from the DSAP’s foundation through this strategy’s direction, and into measurable outcomes within future business plans.

Strategic Focus Areas

RTO3’s sustainability leadership is rooted in six core areas of focus that guide all programs and partnerships:

- Championing Regenerative Tourism: Promoting visitor experiences that respect and preserve the environment, culture, and community while supporting long-term resilience and economic vitality.
- Stakeholder Engagement: Involving business operators, local partners, DMOs, sector groups, and Indigenous communities (including Six Nations of the Grand River and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation) to co-create authentic, true-to-place experiences.
- Leadership in Social Responsibility: Advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) through training and resources to ensure all visitors and stakeholders are welcomed and represented.
- Indigenous Collaboration and Reconciliation: Encouraging partnerships, cultural awareness, and truth and reconciliation initiatives to embed Indigenous perspectives in tourism experiences.

- Data-Informed Decision Making: Using surveys, KPIs, and ongoing monitoring to evaluate impact, guide visitor dispersal, and support regional growth.
- Alignment with Provincial Initiatives: Including TIAO's Advancing Sustainable Tourism in Ontario project and Forward Motion: A Strategic Playbook for Ontario's Tourism Industry.

Governance and Implementation Framework

The DSSC serves as a central advisory and action body, driving innovation, collaboration, and accountability. It operates as a standing committee that informs strategy implementation, monitors progress, and guides alignment between regional partners and RTO3.

The DSAP, endorsed by the RTO3 Board, provides the operational foundation for this strategy. Together, they establish a continuous planning framework:

- Strategic Direction: RTO3 Board endorsement of sustainability as a regional priority.
- Implementation Framework: DSAP actions, KPIs, and partner roles coordinated through the DSSC.
- Operational Execution: Annual business plans integrating sustainability into RTO3's core work and budget cycles.

Key Progress and Achievements (2024–2025)

RTO3's sustainability work has transitioned from planning to implementation. The following achievements demonstrate advancement across three interconnected domains—Management, Socio-Economic, and Natural & Environmental.

Management and Data Systems

- KPI Development: Identified and prioritized sustainability key performance indicators with GreenStep guidance.
- Surveys and Data Collection: Conducted the 2024 Regional Sustainability Stakeholder Survey and initiated baseline measurement for destination-level KPIs.
- Resource Hub Activation: Launched an industry-facing online Resource Hub to centralize tools, guides, and training materials.
- Capacity Building: Delivered the Sustainable & Regenerative Tourism Masterclass Series and Sustainable Tourism Learning Series (2024–2025) with 12 sessions across the region.

- Governance: The DSSC established a rotational expertise-sharing model for each meeting to build peer learning.
- Transparency: Introduced an annual sustainability progress update as part of RTO3's reporting framework.

Socio-Economic Actions

- Business Support and DEIA Advancement: Implemented programs such as the Rainbow Registered Partnership Fund and Pathway to Truth and Reconciliation guidance, supporting inclusive tourism development.
- Capacity Building and Equity: Partnered with the Spark Innovation Lab to provide training for underrepresented tourism entrepreneurs.
- Resident Engagement: Planned a Resident Perception Survey (2026) in collaboration with the HHB Destination Leadership Alliance to inform community-informed tourism policy.
- Industry Collaboration: Strengthened communication with DSSC and stakeholders through the Industry Exchange series and newsletters.
- Regional Campaigns: Launched the Travel Responsible campaign and Pride of Place messaging, promoting community connection and sustainable visitor behavior.

Natural, Cultural, and Environmental Actions

- Visitor Pledge and Communication Toolkit: Developed a region-wide visitor pledge aligned with Destination Canada's Canadian Business Events Sustainability Plan and Leave No Trace principles.
- Environmental Advocacy: Advanced participation in the City of Hamilton's Destination Waterfall Masterplan (2025–2026) and conservation-area sustainability initiatives.
- Transportation and Accessibility: Advocated for multi-modal connections such as Trail2Go and Great Lakes Waterfront Trail linkages to encourage sustainable mobility.
- Climate Action Alignment: Integrated municipal climate plans and developed tourism-specific emissions guidance.
- Knowledge Exchange: Shared best practices from conferences, industry events, and RTO-led learning sessions to enhance regional awareness.

The DSAP Strategic Outlook and 2030 Alignment

This strategy positions RTO3 for sustained leadership in destination sustainability through 2030. Building on its GreenStep Bronze certification, RTO3 has shifted focus from external validation to internal system development and measurable local impact. The decision not to pursue immediate 'Silver' certification reflects a deliberate choice to strengthen internal readiness, partner collaboration, and data systems before the next certification phase. This approach ensures that progress remains authentic, evidence-based, and regionally owned.

Partnerships with organizations that provide educational content, resources, guides, and training through RTO3 strengthen the organization's ability to connect local sustainability initiatives with global networks of purpose-driven travel. They also give businesses and stakeholders in the region access to best practices and impact measurement frameworks.

Next Steps and Continued Engagement

The DSSC will evolve as a resource and working group to ensure this strategy remains adaptive and inclusive. Each action area will be revisited annually through RTO3's business planning cycle to maintain alignment with emerging opportunities and the province's broader sustainability objectives.

RTO3's commitment is clear: to act as a convener, educator, and catalyst for sustainable tourism across Hamilton Halton Brant. This strategy bridges vision and action, ensuring that every step toward 2030 strengthens the social, environmental, and economic fabric of the region.

For further detail, refer to Appendix A: DSSC Action Plan Summary (October 2025).

GreenStep Assessment Outcomes (2024)

RTO3 successfully completed the GreenStep Destination Assessment in 2024, achieving Bronze certification. This process provided a comprehensive evaluation of Hamilton Halton Brant's alignment with global destination sustainability standards, identifying both areas of strength – such as strong natural asset protection and early operator engagement – and key gaps requiring further development, including cross-sector coordination, data collection, and formalized sustainability reporting. The certification marked an important milestone, positioning RTO3 as a recognized destination committed to continuous improvement.

Following the Bronze certification, RTO3 assessed its readiness for Silver and identified that while progress was strong, the certification pathway was not the optimal use of resources in 2025. Instead, RTO3 chose to build internal systems and collaborative structures through the DSAP and DSSC, ensuring that sustainability work remains authentic, measurable, and regionally owned, rather than externally driven.

Sustainability Insights Report (2024)

The Sustainability Insights Report synthesized findings from stakeholder surveys, regional consultations, and best-practice reviews. Key insights included:

- Strong industry support for sustainability as a competitive differentiator.
- A need for consistent definitions and shared language across the sector.
- Operator demand for practical, low-cost resources and toolkits.
- Recognition of the importance of cultural sustainability, particularly in relation to Indigenous and newcomer communities.

The report recommended that RTO3 act as a convener and knowledge broker, ensuring that tourism stakeholders have the tools, resources, and partnerships to make sustainability actionable.

Stakeholder Engagement Summary (2024)

Through surveys, one-on-one consultations, and facilitated sessions, RTO3 gathered input from key partners across Hamilton Halton Brant. Engagement revealed strong enthusiasm for advancing sustainable tourism but also highlighted barriers such as limited staff capacity, uncertainty about certification processes, and lack of clarity around visitor demand for responsible travel. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of regional alignment and requested ongoing opportunities for knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning.

Industry Exchanges (Fall 2024 & Spring 2025)

The RTO3 Industry Exchange series – Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 – provided a collaborative platform for operators, DMOs, and community partners to explore emerging trends and practical applications of sustainable tourism.

Key outcomes included:

- Increased awareness of destination sustainability frameworks and tools.
- Case studies shared by local and regional operators implementing sustainable practices.
- Early commitments from industry leaders to pilot regenerative tourism initiatives.
- A stronger cross-sector network committed to embedding stewardship into the visitor economy.

The exchanges confirmed that ongoing education, storytelling, and collaboration are essential to building momentum toward long-term sustainability goals. The final industry exchange in this series will happen after this report is drafted in Fall 2025.

RT03'S PLACE IN GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY

Environmental sustainability in tourism is more than a conversation about protecting the environment; it is about building a tourism system that balances people, planet, and prosperity. When properly managed, tourism becomes a vehicle for enhancing community well-being, protecting natural and cultural assets, and creating resilient economies. Without this balance, destinations risk eroding the very assets that attract visitors in the first place.

At the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) frame sustainability as an integrated challenge and opportunity. Tourism has a direct role to play in advancing several of these goals. It contributes to climate action by reducing emissions from travel and promoting low-carbon visitor experiences. It supports the protection of life on land by conserving biodiversity and ensuring responsible use of natural areas. It fosters decent work and economic growth by creating fair employment opportunities and building resilience within the sector. It advances reduced inequalities by elevating underrepresented voices and ensuring equitable access to the benefits of tourism. Lastly, it helps build sustainable cities and communities by ensuring tourism development enhances livability and long-term prosperity.

For RT03, environmental sustainability is not an abstract goal, it is a practical necessity. Local pressures are already shaping how the region must respond. Popular sites such as the region's waterfalls, trails, and waterfronts face heavy visitation, leading to erosion, waste management challenges, and safety concerns. Without sustainable visitor management, these natural assets risk degradation.

At the same time, it is not uncommon for residents in some communities to express concerns about overtourism, including congestion, strain on local services, and impacts on quality of life. A sustainable tourism approach ensures that community voices are respected and that growth does not come at the expense of residents' well-being.

Climate commitments also play an important role in shaping the region's sustainability agenda. Municipalities across Hamilton, Halton, and Brant have adopted climate action plans and greenhouse gas reduction targets. Aligning tourism with these commitments requires encouraging low-carbon travel, supporting active transportation such as cycling and paddling, and fostering green infrastructure like EV charging stations and energy-efficient accommodations. In addition, the cultural richness of the region – from Indigenous stories to newcomer experiences and local heritage – highlights the importance of cultural stewardship. Sustainability means ensuring these voices are not tokenized but central to authentic visitor experiences that respect cultural integrity and reconciliation pathways.

Destination sustainability in our region therefore encompasses multiple dimensions. It means taking environmental responsibility by minimizing waste, emissions, and ecological impacts while protecting sensitive ecosystems like the Grand River watershed and the Niagara Escarpment. It means advancing social inclusion by weaving Indigenous, newcomer, and community voices into tourism storytelling in meaningful and authentic ways. It also means ensuring economic equity by guaranteeing that the benefits of tourism, from festivals to culinary trails, are distributed fairly across both urban and rural areas. Just as importantly, it requires accountability and credibility, ensuring that the region maintains transparency, avoids greenwashing, and demonstrates to visitors and partners that its sustainability commitments are real, measurable, and aligned with national and global standards.

Embedding sustainability at the core of RT03's tourism strategy is both a leadership opportunity and a responsibility. By acting on this strategy, the region can safeguard its natural and cultural assets for future generations, enhance the quality of life for residents, and provide visitors with authentic, meaningful, and responsible experiences. It can also position Hamilton Halton Brant as a destination of choice for travelers who increasingly demand credible and responsible travel options. In this way,

sustainability is not simply an add-on to tourism development; it is the foundation of long-term value creation.

SECTION 2

Shared Values

ESTABLISHING COMMON LANGUAGE

One of the most important steps toward building a regional culture of destination sustainability is creating a shared language. Without clear definitions, stakeholders risk working in silos, applying inconsistent approaches, or misunderstanding what sustainability in tourism truly means. By adopting shared terminology, RT03 ensures that everyone – from municipalities to operators – is working toward aligned goals.

Term	Focus	Key Elements	Objective
Destination Stewardship	Collective responsibility for managing a destination's resources and impacts.	Involves local communities, stakeholders, and visitors in decision-making; long-term planning and care for natural and cultural resources.	Ensure sustainable use and protection of a destination's assets for current and future generations.
Destination Sustainability	Long-term viability of destinations in terms of environmental, social, and economic health.	Addresses resource management, community involvement, and cultural integrity; includes policies and practices to mitigate negative impacts.	Create a balanced approach that supports destination longevity and resilience.
Climate Mitigation	Actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions from tourism activities.	Energy efficiency, renewable energy, carbon offsetting, behavioral change initiatives.	Minimize the sector's contribution to climate change.

Responsible Travel	Tourism practices that minimize environmental impacts and promote social equity.	Eco-friendly travel options, community engagement, cultural respect, reducing carbon footprint.	Foster responsible travel behavior and practices among tourists and businesses.
Regenerative Tourism	Actively restoring and enhancing ecosystems, communities, and economies through tourism.	Positive net effects; regeneration of local resources, biodiversity, and community well-being.	Leave destinations better than they were found, contributing to ecological and social regeneration.
Transformational Tourism	Personal growth and change through travel experiences.	Deep engagement with local cultures and environments; emotional and intellectual transformations.	Create meaningful experiences that promote awareness and positive change in travelers and host communities.
Climate Resilience	Ability of destinations to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to climate-related impacts.	Adaptive planning, risk management, proactive strategies to protect environments.	Ensure destinations can withstand and recover from climate-related challenges.
Circular Economy	Systems that minimize waste and maximize resource efficiency through reuse, recycling, and regeneration.	Closed-loop processes, sustainable production, reduced environmental impact.	Create economically viable and environmentally responsible tourism systems.
Community Wellbeing	Overall quality of life, social equity, and prosperity of residents within a destination.	Local engagement, fair economic benefits, health, safety, cultural preservation, social cohesion.	Ensure tourism contributes positively to resident life.

Visitor Stewardship	Shared responsibility among visitors to care for the destinations they experience.	Responsible behavior, respect for local cultures and environments, participation in conservation initiatives.	Cultivate mindful travel practices that protect destinations for current and future visitors.
Sustainable Supply Chain	Ensuring tourism and business operations source goods and services responsibly.	Ethical sourcing, low-impact materials, energy-efficient logistics, supplier compliance.	Reduce negative environmental and social impacts across the supply chain.
Eco-Certification	Third-party verification of sustainable practices in tourism businesses and destinations.	Audits, adherence to standards, continuous improvement in energy, waste, water, and community engagement.	Provide credibility and transparency, helping travelers identify responsible choices.
Low-Impact Tourism	Minimizing ecological footprints and resource consumption of tourism activities.	Reduced energy use, low-emission transport, water conservation, wildlife-friendly practices.	Maintain ecological integrity while allowing responsible enjoyment of destinations.
Green Infrastructure	Integrating nature-based solutions into tourism facilities and urban development.	Sustainable design, renewable energy, green roofs, water-sensitive landscaping, habitat restoration.	Enhance environmental quality, reduce resource use, and support climate resilience.
Regenerative Economy	Economic systems that restore and replenish natural and social capital.	Renewable resources, equitable benefit distribution, reinvestment in local communities.	Actively improve ecosystems, societies, and economic resilience through tourism.

Regenerative Culture	Preservation and revitalization of local cultural heritage through tourism.	Community-led storytelling, arts, traditions, economic benefit.	Strengthen local identity and cultural resilience while enhancing visitor experiences.
Biodiversity Conservation	Protecting and restoring native species and ecosystems within tourism areas.	Habitat preservation, invasive species management, sustainable wildlife tourism, conservation partnerships.	Maintain ecological health and ensure natural attractions remain viable for future generations.
Energy Efficiency	Reducing energy consumption in tourism operations and infrastructure.	Renewable energy, building retrofits, smart systems, behavioral change programs.	Lower carbon emissions, reduce operational costs, support sustainable destination management.
Sustainable Procurement	Acquiring products and services with minimal environmental and social impact.	Local, certified, recyclable, or low-carbon options; ethical labor practices.	Promote responsible consumption and influence wider market toward sustainability.
Environmental Impact Assessment	Evaluating potential environmental consequences of tourism projects or policies.	Identify, predict, and mitigate adverse effects on ecosystems, communities, and resources.	Guide decision-making that minimizes negative environmental impacts.
Social License to Operate	Community acceptance and support for tourism businesses and projects.	Transparent communication, engagement, collaboration with stakeholders.	Foster trust, social cohesion, and sustainable development outcomes.

RT03 VALUES IN SUSTAINABILITY

Shared values underpin shared definitions. For RT03, destination sustainability is guided by principles that align global best practices with local community priorities. These values provide a strategic foundation for decision-making, program design, and stakeholder engagement across Hamilton, Halton, and Brant.

Inclusion	Ensure tourism development is equitable, accessible, and reflective of diverse voices.
Reconciliation	Advance meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities and integrate Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action into tourism development.
Cultural Respect	Protect and celebrate the diverse cultural stories, traditions, and identities of local communities and newcomer populations.
Stewardship	Position RT03 as a facilitator in the guardianship of natural landscapes, waterways, and biodiversity, ensuring their sustainability for future generations.
Community Prosperity	Ensure that tourism generates shared social and economic benefits for residents and businesses.
Environmental Care	Strategic Intent: Support the reduction of regional tourism's ecological footprint and contribute to the restoration of natural systems.

Regional Context

ONTARIO

Tourism is undergoing a significant shift in purpose. Destinations that once measured success primarily through visitor volume are increasingly being evaluated on how well they balance growth with long-term sustainability, resilience, and community wellbeing. This reframing has been accelerated by climate change, biodiversity loss, and the social impacts of overtourism, which have placed tourism under scrutiny from both residents and visitors.

Globally, frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria, and the Future of Tourism Coalition principles are guiding destinations to take a more holistic approach. These frameworks encourage integrating climate action, equitable economic distribution, cultural preservation, and regenerative practices into tourism planning and management.

Regionally, Ontario is positioning itself as a leader in aligning tourism growth with sustainability objectives. Climate adaptation strategies, conservation authority mandates, and municipal climate commitments all shape the context in which RTO3 must operate. Within this landscape, there is a growing expectation from both regional leadership and travelers that sustainability is not an optional add-on but a baseline requirement for competitiveness.

For RTO3 specifically, this means connecting environmental sustainability work with real and visible priorities. First, is the stewardship of natural assets such as the Niagara Escarpment, Cootes Paradise & the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, and the Grand River and its natural heritage systems. Second, is the need to manage visitor pressure at sensitive sites like waterfalls and trails. Third, is the importance of strengthening cultural connections, particularly with Indigenous communities. By grounding its strategic direction in both global frameworks and local realities, RTO3 ensures its work remains credible, relevant, and actionable.

Lastly, RTO3's Regional Tourism Strategy 2024-26 positions environmental sustainability as a cross-cutting priority. Destination sustainability is not treated as a

separate initiative, but rather as a guiding principle that shapes product development, workforce training, marketing, and partnerships. By embedding destination sustainability into the regional strategy, RTO3 ensures that environmental sustainability is integrated into the DNA of tourism development.

REGIONAL CASE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Destination Case Studies

Ontario's Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) are embedding environmental sustainability into planning, visitor management, and education.

Regional Tourism Leadership

- The Tourism Industry Association of Ontario developed a Strategic Playbook (2025-2030), which sets a five-year framework to transition the province's visitor economy from recovery to renewal. It explicitly embeds principles of sustainability, equity, and resilience, asking DMOs and operators to align their planning with climate, cultural, and community goals.
- Destination Ontario has adopted the Sustainable Tourism 2030 Pledge, setting a province-wide framework for continuous improvement and aligning marketing with sustainability goals.
- Throughout Ontario, multiple RTOs have now obtained sustainability-related certifications (e.g. GreenStep, or equivalent), a pattern that underscores the growing institutional norm. This clustering of certified organizations strengthens peer learning, amplifies collective credibility, and raises the bar for industry expectations.
 - RTO 1 – Ontario's Southwest: Achieved GreenStep Bronze Certification after full sustainability assessment (2023).
 - RTO 4 – Huron, Perth, Waterloo & Wellington: Achieved GreenStep Bronze Certification; first Ontario RTO certified (2022).
 - RTO 7 – BruceGreySimcoe: Achieved GreenStep Silver Certification – the highest rating among the Ontario RTOs – reflecting advanced sustainability performance and their Sustainable Tourism Management Plan (2023).
 - RTO 9 – South-Eastern Ontario: Achieved GreenStep Bronze Certification, with an accompanying action plan (2023). RTO9 encourages or shares resources with operators to adopt third-party certification programs and sustainable business practices.

- Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO): Achieved GreenStep Bronze Certification, recognized as a sustainable destination (2024).

Destination & Community Stewardship

- Niagara Parks Commission integrates ecological restoration (wetlands, species-at-risk habitat) with a formal Climate Readiness Plan.
- Pelee Island's Destination Development Plan prioritizes ecological limits and resident wellbeing as core tourism pillars.
- Bruce Trail Conservancy manages the Bruce Trail, Canada's oldest and longest footpath, promoting conservation and sustainable tourism along the Niagara Escarpment.
- Ottawa Tourism Developed the region's first Destination Stewardship Plan, defining a shared vision for tourism's role in community development through extensive public engagement and government support.
- Burlington Economic Development and Tourism Implemented a Destination Stewardship Plan that guides sustainable tourism development, ensuring balanced visitor experiences, community well-being, economic growth, and environmental protection.
- Georgian Bay Biosphere promotes sustainable tourism and trail projects that balance access with conservation.
- Destination Toronto, working with transit partners, promotes low-carbon itineraries and supports businesses to build sustainability action plans.
- Cross-cutting research initiatives (e.g., Niagara Escarpment Biosphere, wildfire risk studies) inform resilience planning and knowledge mobilization for communities and operators.

Key Takeaway

Alongside RT03, TIAO and other RTOs are committed to advancing sustainability through policy leadership, stewardship planning, and education-driven initiatives. Collectively, our efforts demonstrate that aligning ecological resilience with tourism development regionally enhances community wellbeing and strengthens destination competitiveness.

DMO Partnerships and Program Support

RT03's sustainability journey thus far is strengthened by collaboration with partner DMOs, municipalities, Indigenous organizations, and provincial/national tourism bodies. Partnerships with organizations such as TIAO, TIAC, Destination Canada, Indigenous Tourism Ontario, and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada ensure that local action is aligned with broader strategies and funding opportunities.

Initiative / Partnership	Collaboration / Partnering Bodies	Focus Area
GreenStep Certification & Action Plan	GreenStep, TIAO	Strategic sustainability framework
Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Committee	Local experts, environmental & Indigenous communities	Implementation guidance & alignment
Sustainable Tourism Learning Series	FedDev, industry stakeholders	Education & capacity-building
Transformational Travel Design Program	Transformational Travel Council, FedDev	Designing sustainable product offerings
Sustainability Survey	GreenStep, tourism stakeholders	Needs assessment & plan refinement
HHB Destination Leadership Alliance	DMOs, municipalities, Indigenous & economic development	Regional collaboration & strategy alignment

REGIONAL STEWARDSHIP

Sustainability in tourism cannot be achieved by a single organization or through isolated projects. It requires integration across communities, operators, governments, and visitors. In our region, stewardship must be understood as a shared responsibility where all actors have a role to play in protecting and enhancing the region's cultural and natural heritage.

To RT03, regional stewardship means the collective management of tourism impacts to ensure that natural, cultural, and social assets are preserved for future generations. In practice, we are committed to:

- Encouraging operators to adopt responsible business practices.
- Supporting municipalities in aligning tourism management with climate and conservation policies.
- Engaging residents in shaping how tourism unfolds in their communities.
- Empowering visitors to act as caretakers of the places they experience.

Additionally, as a regional coordinating body, RT03 is uniquely positioned to act as a convener, educator, and catalyst for action. Its role in stewardship and integration includes:

- Providing frameworks and tools for operators to measure and improve sustainability.
- Facilitating cross-sector dialogues that bridge tourism with conservation, planning, and cultural priorities.
- Amplifying community and Indigenous voices within destination storytelling.
- Tracking and communicating progress against shared sustainability goals.

By embracing stewardship and integration, RT03 can ensure that sustainability is not siloed within the tourism industry but woven throughout the fabric of regional development and governance.

SECTION 4

Moving Forward

The Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability for RT03 provides a structured pathway to embed sustainability into every level of tourism development and management. To be effective, the strategy must balance ambition with practicality, ensuring that operators, municipalities, and communities can engage meaningfully without being overwhelmed. The following will detail RT03's commitment to destination sustainability moving forward.

KEY MILESTONES

1. Internal Sustainability Audit (2024)

- a. Conduct a comprehensive internal sustainability audit of RTO3 operations, building on the findings of the Basic Sustainability Assessment Tool (BSAT).
- b. Identify gaps, risks, and opportunities for improvement in governance, resource use, and program delivery.
- c. Develop an internal action plan with clear targets for energy efficiency, waste reduction, staff training, and sustainable procurement.
- d. Establishes credibility by ensuring RTO3 models best practices before asking operators and partners to adopt similar measures.

2. Membership with Partner Organizations (2025 and beyond)

- a. Explore membership with Environmental Sustainability for Destinations for knowledge mobilization and partnerships.
- b. Investigate how certifications can grow capacity and establish accountability.

3. Shared Language and Definitions (2024-2025)

- a. Establish a regional glossary of sustainability terms – as demonstrated in this paper.
- b. Continue to deliver learning sessions on environmental sustainability topics for operators and municipal partners.
- c. Develop a communication toolkit to align messaging across the region.

4. Capacity Building and Early Adoption (2024-2026)

- a. Support sustainability self-assessment tools for operators.
- b. Create a network of “early adopter champions” to share best practices.
- c. Host forums to showcase progress and foster collaboration – within industry wide events and SOTC.
- d. Integrate environmental sustainability at key stages in the product and experience development process, the development of destination infrastructure, and in support for special activities and experiences.
- e. Spotlight or highlight business operators adopting sustainability practices through e-mail newsletters and other social platforms.

KEY MILESTONES

5. Integration with Policy and Planning (2026-2027)

- a. Align regional tourism strategies with municipal and provincial climate action and land-use plans and support.
- b. Formalize partnerships with conservation authorities and Indigenous-led initiatives.
- c. Develop incentives for operators adopting certified sustainable practices.

6. Measurement and Reporting (2027-2028)

- a. Support the development a regional sustainability dashboard with clear metrics (e.g., carbon reduction, visitor distribution, resident satisfaction).
- b. Regularly update and share outcomes to ensure transparency and accountability.

7. Long-Term Transformation (2028 and beyond)

- a. Position RTO3 as a national leader in responsible tourism through innovation and collaboration.
- b. Support the transition toward regenerative practices that restore and enhance natural and cultural assets.
- c. Ensure tourism remains aligned with community wellbeing, resilience, and inclusivity.

SECTION 5

Metrics and Evaluation

To ensure that this strategy delivers real impact, it is essential to measure progress using clear, transparent, and credible metrics. Evaluation must go beyond surface-level indicators to capture the broader social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EVALUATION

1. **Transparency:** Metrics and results should be openly shared with stakeholders, residents, and visitors.
2. **Relevance:** Indicators must reflect the realities of Hamilton Halton Brant's tourism system and its priority assets.
3. **Comparability:** Data collection should align with provincial, national, and global frameworks to allow benchmarking.
4. **Adaptability:** Evaluation systems should evolve as new challenges, opportunities, and data sources emerge.

CORE INDICATOR CATEGORIES

The following themes, while not exhaustive nor prescriptive, provide a lens through which we can gauge momentum and assess whether we are meaningfully advancing this strategy.

1. Environmental Impact

- GHG emissions associated with regional travel and local tourism operations.
- Noise and light pollution.
- Local air quality (AQHI) and water.
- Waste reduction and diversion rates.
- Biodiversity and ecosystem health indicators (e.g., trail erosion, habitat protection).

2. Economic Contribution

- Tourism revenue distributed across local communities.
- Proportion of operators engaged in sustainable practices and pursuing SMART sustainability goals. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)
- Growth in green jobs, internships, student employment & co-operative education programming and employee training opportunities.
- Visitor spending patterns that support local supply chains.

3. Social & Cultural Wellbeing

- Resident satisfaction with tourism (via resident sentiment survey)
- Indigenous participation and leadership in tourism development.
- Preservation and promotion of cultural heritage assets.
- Accessibility and inclusivity of tourism experiences.

- **Visitor Experience & Behavior**
 - Visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation.
 - Adoption of responsible travel behaviors (e.g., waste reduction, respect for cultural protocols).
 - Visitor distribution across the region to reduce congestion at sensitive sites.

DATA COLLECTION APPROACHES

- **Surveys and Polling:** Regular resident and visitor surveys to track perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioral trends.
- **Operator Reporting:** Voluntary or incentivized reporting on sustainability practices by tourism businesses.
- **Technology Tools:** Use of GIS, mobile apps, and digital tracking to monitor visitor flows and environmental impacts.
- **Partnership Data:** Integration of municipal, conservation authority, and Indigenous community data into regional reporting.
- **Other Secondary Data:** Integration of other relevant data from non-partners, such as Moneris, Canadian Tourism Data Collective, Tourism HR, Canadian universities, etc.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Reporting:** Publish a periodic environmental sustainability report highlighting progress, challenges, and areas for improvement.
- **Regional Dashboard:** Develop a publicly accessible online dashboard to provide regular updates on key metrics.
- **Third-Party Validation:** Engage external experts or certification on an ad-hoc basis.

SECTION 6

Future Ready

The Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability is not a static plan – it is designed to evolve as new opportunities, partnerships, and global standards emerge. Looking forward, integration across regional systems will be critical to ensure destination sustainability becomes embedded within all aspects of Hamilton Halton Brant’s tourism economy. This strategy directly informs RT03’s annual business planning process. Each recommendation will be integrated into departmental priorities and budget considerations for the 2026–2028 period.

LONG TERM INTEGRATION PATHWAYS

1. Policy Alignment

- Embed destination sustainability principles into municipal tourism strategies, regional land use planning, and conservation policies.
- Advocate for integration with Ontario’s tourism and climate strategies to ensure funding and policy support.
- Align principles with the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario’s (TIAOs) ‘Forward Motion – Strategic Playbook’

2. Cross-Sector Collaboration

- Strengthen partnerships between tourism, transportation, conservation, economic development, and higher education.
- Establish formal collaboration channels with Indigenous communities to ensure co-leadership and knowledge integration.

3. Technology & Innovation

- Integrate smart destination tools (e.g., real-time visitor flow monitoring, digital interpretation) to manage tourism impacts.
- Explore integration with sustainability certification platforms and carbon tracking systems for operators and visitors.

4. Education & Workforce Development

- Embed destination sustainability and sustainability competencies into tourism and hospitality training programs.
- Support ongoing professional development for operators to adapt to evolving sustainability standards.

PHASED APPROACH TO INTEGRATION

- **Short Term (1–2 years):** Align with municipal and DMO strategies, pilot integration of metrics into existing reports, and build capacity among operators.
- **Medium Term (3–5 years):** Embed destination sustainability into funding criteria, workforce training, and certification adoption.
- **Long Term (5+ years):** Achieve full integration across policy and industry practice, positioning the region as a champion for sustainable tourism in Ontario.

MECHANISMS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Periodic Progress Review:** Conduct joint reviews with municipalities, DMOs, and Indigenous partners to track integration progress.
- **Shared Governance Model:** Develop a steering group or advisory board to oversee long-term implementation and adaptation.
- **Adaptive Management:** Ensure flexibility to update the strategy as conditions change (e.g., climate impacts, market trends, technological shifts).

SECTION 7

Conclusion

The Regional Strategy for Destination Sustainability for Hamilton Halton Brant provides a framework for embedding sustainability and responsibility into every aspect of the tourism ecosystem. By building on local assets, engaging diverse stakeholders, and aligning with global best practices, this document positions the region to not only mitigate tourism's impacts but also maximize its benefits for communities, visitors, and the environment. This strategy outlines what partners can expect from RTO3: coordinated leadership, transparent metrics, cross-sector collaboration, and continued investment in knowledge-sharing and data-driven planning. It also defines what RTO3 expects from its partners: shared responsibility, active engagement in sustainability learning, and collective action toward the 2030 goals.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Shared Responsibility:** Residents, visitors, operators, municipalities, and Indigenous partners all play a role in shaping a more sustainable tourism system.
- **Action-Oriented:** The strategy outlines practical steps for operators, communities, and policymakers to take in the near, medium, and long term.
- **Evidence-Based:** Clear metrics and evaluation processes will ensure progress is measurable, credible, and transparent.
- **Future-Focused:** Integration across policies, sectors, and technologies will embed destination sustainability into the region's long-term identity.

CALL TO ACTION

The transition toward destination sustainability cannot be achieved in isolation. It requires collaboration, investment, and a willingness to innovate. RTO3 and its partners are well-positioned to lead this change and set a benchmark for sustainable destination management in Ontario and beyond.

Tourism in Hamilton Halton Brant is at a crossroads – the path we decide is crucial for evolving our identity as a thriving destination. By embracing this strategy, we can create a tourism system that is not only economically robust, but also socially inclusive and environmentally regenerative.

Now is the time to align strategies, mobilize resources, and act collectively. Through deliberate, measurable action, RTO3 and its partners can ensure that Hamilton Halton Brant evolves as a destination where sustainability is not a goal for the future – but a defining feature of the present.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario whose funding investment provided RTO3 with the opportunity to have a business focus on sustainable destination tourism development.

RTO3 would like to extend appreciation to all Hamilton Halton Brant Destination Leadership Alliance who worked in collaboration with the RTO 3 team. Working together, we can ensure that our region continues to be a leader in responsible tourism and a destination that thrives socially, environmentally, and economically – for generations to come. Thank you to the following destination tourism organizations for engagement:

Tourism Brantford, County of Brant Tourism & Economic Development, Six Nations Tourism, The Mississaugas Credit First Nation, Tourism Hamilton, Tourism Burlington, Visit Oakville, Visit Halton Hills and the Town of Milton Economic Development.

Thank you to the Destination Sustainability Stakeholder Action Committee (DSSC) members for establishing the Destination Sustainability Action Plan framework to help focus the regional collective and collaborative work effort. Thank you to the following DSSC committee members for volunteering your time and talent:

- Nancy Rowland, CEO, Royal Botanical Gardens
- Rebecca Szczepanowski, Climate Change Officer, City of Brantford
- Ashleigh Montague, Co-Founder, BLK Owned
- Jaquie Jamieson, Manager of Tourism & Community Development, Six Nations Tourism
- Colleen Ryan, Associate Director, Marketing, Communications & Customer Experience, John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport
- Sherry Lucia, Tourism Product Development Specialist-Convention Sales, City of Hamilton
- Fionnula Wade, Climate Change Coordinator, Hamilton Conservation Authority
- Marlaine Koehler, Executive Director, Waterfront Regeneration Trust
- Vannalin Bun, Communications Coordinator, African Lion Safari
- Bev Scott, Manager, Business and Visitor Experience Development
- Shaylyn Robertson, Sustainable Tourism Specialist, GreenStep Sustainable Tourism
- Jenn Burling, Director of Sustainable Tourism, GreenStep Sustainable Tourism

Authorship

RT03 Regional Destination Sustainability Strategy

has been co-authored by

Hamid Dwyer, Destination Sustainability Officer (Primary Author)

and

Bev Scott, Manager, Business and Visitor Experience Development

and supported by the entire RT03 team.



Dwyer, H., Scott, B. (2025). Regional Destination Sustainability Strategy.
RT03 Hamilton Halton Brant.