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The Hotel Yearbook
**Hospitality
ESG Edition
2024**

**Unlocking the
ESG Innovation Stack
in Hospitality**

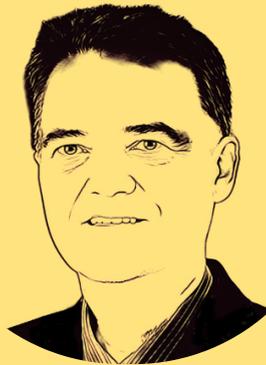
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Sustainability Standards & Assurance in Travel & Tourism The GSTC Criteria

Validating Sustainability

Randy Durband

CEO at Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

Synopsis

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council® (GSTC), formed by UNEP, UNWTO, conservation groups, and key travel and tourism businesses, sets global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Criteria. This initiative is a crucial part of sustainable tourism and hospitality, providing guidelines for applying these criteria and GSTC-Recognized Standards in both private and public sectors. The GSTC emphasizes the importance of 'assurance' and 'verification' over loosely used terms like 'certification' in the hospitality sector, advocating for a clear distinction between these terms to avoid confusion and greenwashing. GSTC's CEO Randy Durband provides some crucial insights.

Created by the UN agencies UNEP and UNWTO in conjunction with conservation groups plus leading travel and tourism businesses, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council®(GSTC) establishes and manages **global standards for sustainable travel and tourism**, known as the **GSTC Criteria**. That is GSTC's foremost mission within the general ecosystem of sustainable tourism and hospitality. Secondly, GSTC provides guidance on how to apply the GSTC Criteria and "GSTC-Recognized Standards" – standards owned by others that formally conform to the GSTC Criteria – to the private and public sectors. Standards are applied in a variety of ways: for training and awareness of the breadth of sustainability, for external verification or "assurance" systems, for guidance and codes of conduct, for self-assessments on the current level of an organization's holistic approach to sustainability.

The **GSTC Industry Criteria** have been built out to support strong technical guidance for good certification. This is driven by a well-developed and defined assurance program that conforms to international norms for auditing and certification, to a degree greater than most if not all players in this space.

STANDARDS & ASSURANCE - WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "ASSURANCE"?

The usual word associated with standards in sustainable tourism is certification, but we believe that the term certification is used too loosely in the hospitality sector. "Assurance" and "Verification" are the more generic terms and "Certification" is a term best reserved for a certain type of assurance or verification system; i.e., for schemes with well qualified auditors, schemes that maintain impartiality by treating certification as a judgment made by persons other than those that coached a business to improvement. Consultants prepare businesses to seek certification, whereas auditors analyze practices with an objective detachment. Combining the two creates a conflict of interest, disqualifying the result from being considered true certification.

Reserving the term certification for how it is applied in other sectors and describing other levels of assurance/verification based on their degree of scrutiny serves to reduce the confusion of the current clutter of the endlessly-growing plethora of green or sustainable labels in hospitality.

WHO CARES ABOUT THESE TECHNICAL ISSUES AND TERMS?

Government regulators and those who do not wish to run afoul of regulations of today and tomorrow. Risk managers, brands'

attorneys, investigative journalists, guests motivated to use truly sustainable products and services, and all those offended by greenwashing. The latter groups are growing, as attested by 53% of the respondents from Booking.com's 2022 survey of travelers from 32 countries who expressed annoyance with service providers that are not green enough.

Another term used all too loosely, and mostly incorrectly, in the hospitality community is "accreditation." It may not seem detrimental to use these terms incorrectly in a colloquial sense, but given the current regulatory pressure to base green or sustainable claims on products and services, the hospitality community is compelled to take note of the correct legalistic terminology.

The EU Green Claims Directive and other aspects of the broader framework of the EU CSDDD — Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive — plus increasing amounts of national requirements on sustainability claims and treatment elsewhere make it imperative for the hospitality ownership and management community to take stock of the regulatory pressures. That requires understanding the terminology.

When the EU and its peers speak of "accreditation", they do not use it as a synonym for "certification" but rather its legalistic meaning. Certification is a mark on a product or service; whereas accreditation is a mark on certification bodies. (*read more here on definitions of these terms*)

In 2016 GSTC issued its Accreditation Manual for the certification of hotels/ accommodations, tour operators, and destinations, and published revised version 3.0 in 2023 (*read more here for the latest version*). This conforms to international norms for proper auditing, certification, and accreditation. Like the Criteria, it is available for download free of charge to all. GSTC provides accreditation of Certification Bodies according to international norms and to EU requirements as understood today. Readers will be hard-pressed to find others that do both of those.

This scheme was developed in line with such schemes in many other sectors, as a pathway for hospitality to join other sectors where it has previously neglected to tread.

THE BENEFIT OF AN ASSURANCE SCHEME

Businesses wishing to make legitimate claims of the sustainability of their products or services, and especially businesses whose "products" are collections of enormous numbers of contracted supplier-operated services, are all well served with a credible system of assurance.

Such a system serves as a credible basis to describe their product lines in terms of sustainability.

Businesses are eager to supplement such claims with objective data on key elements of sustainability, but that data is not easily gained and qualified. Even where reliable data does paint a positive picture of one or more elements of a hotel — or a group of hotels — are sustainable, the idea of speaking about a holistic approach to sustainability is simply not viable without a certification mark to the GSTC Criteria or a GSTC Recognized standard.

Short of credible systems, it is challenging to know how “sustainable” your overall operations are, and increasingly dangerous to make sustainability claims in the marketplace.

Hospitality management and ownership will do well to take a deeper look into verification systems, true certification, learn about accreditation, and learn about current and pending and planned regulations. That learning will necessarily draw them to what GSTC has uniquely created with a credible accreditation scheme.



Randy Durband — CEO at Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

Randy Durband is CEO of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), the UN-created NGO that manages global standards for sustainable tourism. He brings a unique blend of experience from two career paths in tourism spanning 40 years – in senior leadership positions with major U.S. outbound tour operators, including as President of Travcoa, Clipper Cruise Lines, Executive VP of Tauck – and now a second career in sustainable tourism. He is a frequent advisor and speaker to governments and businesses on sustainable tourism policies and implementation. He has served on many tourism boards and committees and as a judge for leading sustainable tourism awards.

Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) — gstccouncil.org/en

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council® (GSTC) establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Criteria. There are two sets: Destination Criteria for public policy-makers and destination managers, and Industry Criteria for hotels and tour operators. They are the result of a worldwide effort to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism. They are arranged in four pillars: (A) Sustainable management; (B) Socioeconomic impacts; (C) Cultural impacts; and (D) Environmental impacts. Since tourism destinations each have their own culture, environment, customs, and laws, the Criteria are designed to be adapted to local conditions and supplemented by additional criteria for the specific location and activity.