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Fixing Hotels' Biggest Sustainability Blind Spot: Waste

Waste management

Greg M. Poirier

MBA, Global Director, Hospitality Certification Programs, Audubon International



Greg Poirier, Global Director, Hospitality Certification Programs at Audubon International, highlights that, unlike energy and water, hotel waste is still poorly measured and managed, making it a major sustainability blind spot. He argues that real progress depends on circular procurement (designing out waste from the start) and standardized tracking using tools like HWMM and tech platforms to automate data, improve diversion, cut methane and PFAS risks, and reduce hauling costs.

Hotels have started making major progress on sustainability over the past decade. Energy efficiency and water conservation are now more standard practice, from LED retrofits to low-flow fixtures and advanced HVAC systems. Yet one of the industry's biggest sustainability challenges remains stuck in the shadows: waste.

Unlike energy and water, which benefit from smart meters, utility portals, and early-stage standardized ESG reporting, hotel waste management is fragmented and poorly tracked. Trash leaves the loading dock and, for most properties, disappears into a black hole of inconsistent data, unreliable hauler reports, and mounting climate liabilities.

At Audubon International, our Hospitality Certification programs use up-to-date scientific standards for evaluating the efforts of hotels and resorts. These primary areas of focus include communication, community, energy, water, waste, chemicals, and indoor air quality. We require benchmarking data wherever possible—and when not available, the best verifiable estimates. Without baseline metrics, there is no reliable path to measurable impact. Waste consistently has the lowest-quality data and reporting, which is a growing concern.

WHY WASTE STILL LAGS BEHIND

Hotels globally face unique challenges in managing their waste footprint. In Puerto Rico, infrastructure is inconsistent between communities, and across the Caribbean, landfill options are weak or nearing capacity. Even in the U.S., more than 140,000 jurisdictions govern landfills alongside thousands of private haulers, making consistency nearly impossible.

Even within the same brand or management company, waste reporting varies dramatically due to:

- Manual data entry that is slow, inconsistent, and error-prone
- Lack of universal terminology
- Different reporting rules across jurisdictions
- Small haulers with limited IT infrastructure
- Weak verification and limited auditability

As a result, while energy and water reporting continue to mature, waste data is often anecdotal, incomplete, or unverifiable. That gap undermines environmental progress and erodes ESG reporting credibility.

THE MISSING LINK: WASTE AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

A major reason waste remains an afterthought is that many hotels still operate within a linear procurement model—take, use, dispose. But waste cannot be solved at the loading dock; it must be addressed at the purchasing stage, long before materials reach the guestroom or kitchen.

A circular economy approach flips the model. It emphasizes eliminating waste at the source, keeping materials in use longer, and designing products and purchasing systems that minimize environmental impact across their full life cycle.

For hotels, this means procurement teams must:

- Prioritize durable, repairable, and reusable goods
- Vet suppliers for recyclability, composability, and PFAS-free materials
- Reduce unnecessary packaging
- Choose products with verified end-of-life pathways
- Align purchasing decisions with diversion goals

When procurement and waste management operate independently, hotels unintentionally create waste streams they are not equipped to manage. When the two functions are integrated, circular principles begin to drive operations — reducing both volume and cost.

A STEP FORWARD: STANDARDIZING WASTE DATA

The Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, working with Greenview and WWF, developed the Hotel Waste Measurement Methodology (HWMM) to bring consistency to waste reporting. HWMM provides a standardized way to define waste streams, calculate diversion rates, and set reduction goals across regions and property types.

TURNING METHODOLOGY INTO ACTION

Technology platforms such as Z3 Data are helping hotels operationalize HWMM by automating and centralizing waste reporting. Key capabilities include:

- Automated invoice processing
- Portfolio-wide visibility
- Analytics for diversion, emissions, and cost anomalies
- Integration with ESG frameworks
- Auditable records for verification

With analytics in place, inefficiencies become opportunities. One hotel reduced hauling fees by 60% by optimizing compactor schedules.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: WHY IT MATTERS

Even with better tracking, larger environmental and business risks associated with waste persist:

1. Methane – Food waste is a major methane driver, making organics diversion essential.
2. PFAS – Landfills are sinks for PFAS, which migrate into leachate and gas.
3. Hidden Costs – Low landfill fees mask long-term environmental and financial liabilities.

WHAT HOTELS CAN DO NOW

- Make food waste diversion a core climate strategy
- Adopt standardized tracking using HWMM
- Leverage technology to automate reporting
- Align procurement with circularity
- Use data insights to reduce hauling costs and improve diversion

THE BOTTOM LINE

Waste has long been hospitality's forgotten metric, hidden behind the loading dock. But that blind spot is no longer sustainable. With climate impacts mounting and investor scrutiny increasing, waste must be treated with the same rigor as energy and water.

Circularity is the next frontier, and procurement must sit at the heart of it. Fixing the waste blind spot isn't just good sustainability—it's good business.

