



Forum: 2nd Committee (Environmental & Cultural)

Issue: Implementation of sustainable tourism as a way to protect natural and cultural heritage sites

Introduction

Sustainable tourism represents a critical strategy for balancing economic development with the protection of the world's most precious natural and cultural heritage sites, as the tourism industry continues to expand globally while threatening the very assets it depends upon. With over 1.4 billion international arrivals annually, tourism generates significant revenue for destination communities—yet uncontrolled visitor flows create substantial environmental degradation, infrastructure strain, and cultural erosion at UNESCO World Heritage Sites and other protected areas.

The phenomenon of "overtourism" has reached crisis levels at iconic destinations including Venice, Barcelona, Machu Picchu, and the Great Barrier Reef, where visitor numbers far exceed sustainable carrying capacities, driving local populations from their homes and threatening irreversible damage to ecosystems and heritage values. Implementing sustainable tourism practices offers a pathway to reconcile tourism's economic benefits with conservation imperatives, directly supporting UN Sustainable Development Goals 8 (decent work and economic growth), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption) and 14 (life below water).

This issue demands urgent international action to establish binding frameworks, provide financial support to developing countries, and empower local communities to manage tourism as a force for conservation rather than destruction.

Definition of Key Terms

Sustainable Tourism — tourism that accounts fully for its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities to ensure conservation and intergenerational equity.

Overtourism — the excessive concentration of tourist visitors to a destination, causing overcrowding, environmental degradation, infrastructure collapse, resident displacement, and diminished quality of both visitor experiences and local lives.

Carrying Capacity — the maximum number of visitors that a destination can sustainably accommodate at a given time without causing unacceptable environmental degradation, cultural harm, visitor experience decline, or community hardship; encompasses ecological, social, economic, and perceptual dimensions.

Natural Heritage Sites — protected areas of geological, biological, or ecological significance - including national parks, wetlands, coral reefs, and biodiversity hotspots - designated by

UNESCO or national governments for extraordinary universal value and irreplaceable ecosystem services.

Cultural Heritage Sites — monuments, archaeological areas, historic cities, cultural landscapes, and sites of outstanding universal significance from historical, artistic, scientific, or cultural perspectives, encompassing both tangible structures and intangible cultural expressions.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) — tourism initiatives managed and controlled by local communities, ensuring equitable benefit distribution, cultural preservation, environmental protection, and community economic empowerment while maintaining authenticity and local authority over heritage resources.

Heritage Carbon Footprint — the cumulative greenhouse gas emissions associated with heritage site operations and visitor access, encompassing transportation emissions, infrastructure energy consumption, construction embodied carbon, and operational impacts.

Destination Carrying Capacity Measurement (DCM) — a data-driven tool for evaluating the maximum visitor volume that optimizes economic returns while preserving environmental health, community well-being, and cultural authenticity through continuous monitoring and adaptive management.

Background Information

Historical Context and Development of Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism emerged in the late 1980s as environmental and cultural advocates responded to growing damage caused by rapid tourism expansion. Prior to formalized frameworks, tourism was viewed primarily through an economic lens, with limited consideration of environmental or social costs. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention represented an early landmark recognizing that certain natural and cultural sites possess "outstanding universal value" deserving international protection, though mechanisms for managing tourism at these sites remained underdeveloped.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, tourism numbers exploded globally, particularly to heritage destinations. UNESCO's World Heritage List, which grew to include over 1,100 sites by the 2020s, created powerful incentives for destination development that often prioritized visitor access over conservation. The 1999 Global Code of Ethics for Tourism marked a turning point, establishing principles for responsible tourism conduct among states, industries, and travelers. Subsequently, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Agenda integrated tourism explicitly into global development frameworks, recognizing its potential to support conservation and poverty reduction.

The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme, launched in 2011, formalized a destination-level approach integrating heritage management with sustainable tourism planning through stakeholder cooperation. However, implementation has proceeded unevenly, with wealthier nations and heritage sites advancing practical tools while developing countries face capacity and financial constraints.

Current Situation

The contemporary tourism landscape is characterized by acute overcrowding at heritage destinations, with overtourism now recognized as a distinct threat alongside climate change and armed conflict. Several flagship sites exemplify the crisis:

Venice, Italy: Receives approximately 30 million visitors annually to a city of 50,000 permanent residents - a 600:1 ratio - causing water pollution from boat traffic, structural damage to historic buildings, and driving residential depopulation (only 50,000 residents remain versus 175,000 in 1951). Venice was placed on UNESCO's "List of World Heritage Sites in Danger" due to persistent overtourism effects despite implementing a €5 entry fee for day visitors in April 2024.

Barcelona, Spain: Receives 55 million annual visitors in a city of 1.6 million residents, creating severe congestion, waste accumulation, cultural tensions, skyrocketing housing costs, and displacement of locals.

Machu Picchu, Peru: UNESCO recommends a maximum of 2,500 visitors daily, yet summer months regularly exceed 5,000 daily visitors, causing erosion, structural damage (tourists have stolen stones from ancient walls), vegetation degradation, and overcrowding that undermines the visitor experience.

Great Barrier Reef, Australia: Experiencing severe coral bleaching due to climate change exacerbated by tourism impacts; snorkeling and diving contribute to direct damage to fragile coral ecosystems, prompting UNESCO to recommend adding it to the endangered heritage list.

Natural Heritage Sites in East Africa: Kenya's wildlife populations face human-wildlife conflicts, habitat degradation, and enforcement challenges despite sustainable tourism potential, while Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve was delisted from UNESCO World Heritage status due to logging and dam construction overriding conservation priorities.

The post-COVID recovery accelerated these pressures, with pent-up travel demand surging to destinations that had insufficient time to implement capacity management systems. Simultaneously, climate change has amplified risks by increasing extreme weather events and natural disasters that interact with high visitor concentrations, creating safety emergencies (evacuations, overcrowding in emergencies) not adequately addressed in heritage management frameworks.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Leading Countries in Sustainable Tourism Implementation

Costa Rica: Positioned as the global pioneer in sustainable tourism, Costa Rica has protected approximately 25-29% of its land area in national parks and reserves, achieved 98-99% renewable electricity generation, and established the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program evaluating businesses on energy, water, waste, and cultural criteria. The government's "Payment for Environmental Services" (PES) program compensates landowners for forest conservation, rewarding habitat protection directly. Despite achievements, Costa Rica faces challenges managing visitor impacts and ensuring equitable income distribution.

New Zealand: Advanced sustainable tourism through the "Tiaki Promise" - a nationwide initiative encouraging visitors to respect natural and cultural heritage - combined with government and industry partnerships supporting low-impact experiences such as Māori-led cultural tours and electric boats in Milford Sound. New Zealand actively promotes regional tourism to lesser-known areas, alleviating pressure on iconic sites. The country has built strong conservation partnerships integrating indigenous ecological knowledge.

Slovenia: Recognized globally as a sustainability leader with "Slovenia Green" certification scheme evaluating tourism providers across energy, water, waste, and cultural preservation criteria. By 2023, over 250 tourism providers and 59 destinations achieved Green certification, with 90% of overnight stays occurring at certified destinations. The country combines conservation with quality tourism experiences in forests, lakes, and caves.

Bhutan: Implements a distinctive "high-value, low-volume" model through a Sustainable Development Fee (approximately \$250/day for international visitors), generating conservation funding while limiting environmental impact and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for communities. Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" index prioritizes community well-being alongside economic growth.

Iceland: Employs renewable energy (85% of electricity from geothermal and hydroelectric sources) and the "Leave No Trace" campaign limiting access to fragile volcanic zones and glaciers. However, tourism grew 400% between 2010-2018, causing ecosystem damage and necessitating enhanced management.

European Union Member States (Portugal, Denmark, France):

Portugal: Combines renewable energy policies with eco-certified resorts, particularly in the Algarve region, and clean mobility initiatives in Lisbon.

Denmark: Leverages Copenhagen's rank as one of the world's most sustainable cities, focuses on cycling infrastructure and waste reduction, and implements the "Copenhagen Climate Partnership" and "Green Key" certification.

France: Manages severe overtourism at sites like Mont-Saint-Michel through visitor restrictions and ecological protection measures.

South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam: Emerging leaders in sustainable tourism (2025-2026), implementing conservation policies, eco-certified accommodations, reduced waste programs, and green certifications for hotels and tour operators.

Russian Federation:

Legislative measures. Development and implementation of laws and regulations aimed at protecting heritage sites from excessive commercialization. For example: Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 2229 dated December 21, 2023 "On Approval of the Rules for the Organization and Implementation of Tourism, Including Ensuring the Safety of Tourism in Specially Protected Natural Areas of Federal Significance."

Infrastructure development. Creation of conditions for ecological tourism in specially protected natural areas (SPNA), introduction of environmentally friendly technologies in the hospitality industry.

Programs and projects. For example, the development of ethnographic tourism in Yakutia and the Altai Republic, programs for the restoration of historical city centers through tourism investments.

Educational initiatives. Training of specialists in the field of tourism and hospitality, studying the principles of sustainable development, methods of working with cultural heritage, and environmental management.

Developing Nations with Community-Based Tourism:

Kenya: Implements sustainable wildlife tourism through community conservancies balancing wildlife protection with local livelihoods, yet faces human-wildlife conflicts and habitat degradation challenges.

Kyrgyzstan: Pioneering community-based tourism as an economic lifeline in rural areas while preserving cultural and natural heritage.

International Organizations

UNESCO: The primary specialized agency for culture and heritage, UNESCO operates the World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (established 2011), which:

- Facilitates destination-level planning integrating tourism and heritage management through stakeholder cooperation
- Provides the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Toolkit with step-by-step guides for site managers on visitor management, community engagement, and governance
- Launched "People Protecting Places" initiative supporting tourism recovery post-pandemic while advancing sustainability
- Established monitoring of heritage sites and their threats
- Convenes expert networks building capacity in developing countries

UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): The UN specialized agency for tourism, UNWTO:

- Develops global guidelines and indicators for sustainable tourism development
- Coordinates the "Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty" (ST-EP) initiative with UNCTAD for poverty alleviation
- Produces capacity-building resources including the EU Guidebook on Sustainable Tourism for Development, field-tested in Kenya, India, Vietnam, Senegal, Botswana, and Timor-Leste
- Adopted the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics (2015), establishing binding ethical principles
- Provides technical assistance to developing nations

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS): Adopted the "ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Tourism: Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage and the Resilience of Communities" (2022), establishing seven core principles for responsible and sustainable cultural tourism management centered on heritage protection and community rights.

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: Promotes sustainable tourism at internationally designated wetland sites as a conservation mechanism and sustainable livelihoods tool.

World Monuments Fund (WMF): Identifies threats to heritage sites and advocates for climate-informed conservation, recognizing climate change as the predominant threat to Sub-Saharan African sites while urbanization and development dominate Asian heritage risks.

UN General Assembly: Formally recognized sustainable tourism's role in achieving sustainable development, declaring 2027 as the "International Year of Sustainable and Resilient Tourism." "Relevant Treaties and UN Resolutions

Relevant Treaties and UN Resolutions

UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972): The foundational treaty establishing the World Heritage List, designating sites of outstanding universal value for international protection and requiring member states to develop conservation plans integrating sustainable management.

UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970): Addresses illicit trafficking threatening heritage, relevant to tourism contexts where antiquities smuggling is incentivized by black markets.

Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003): Protects oral traditions, performing arts, and cultural practices, recognizing that sustainable tourism can either support or undermine these elements through commodification risks.

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971): Designates wetlands of international importance, explicitly supporting sustainable tourism as a conservation and livelihood mechanism.

Convention on Biological Diversity (1992): Promotes ecotourism as a conservation mechanism and source of sustainable livelihoods, particularly in biodiversity-rich developing nations.

UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021): While focused on AI, includes principles on preserving cultural heritage and cultural diversity potentially affected by AI-mediated tourism systems.

UNWTO Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics (2020): The first legally binding treaty established by UNWTO, obligating member states to promote responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism while respecting cultural attributes, local traditions, and host community rights.

Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954): Protects heritage during conflicts; relevant as tourism sites face destruction in fragile and conflict-affected regions.

UN Resolutions

UN General Assembly Resolution 70/193 (2015): Declared 2017 as the "International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development," recognizing tourism's potential for sustainable development, poverty reduction, and cultural understanding.

UN General Assembly Resolution 76/185 (2021): Addressed preventing and combating crimes affecting the environment, including heritage degradation and illegal trafficking linked to tourism.

UN General Assembly Resolution 78/260 (2023): Recognized the importance of sustainable and resilient tourism in conserving environmentally vulnerable natural areas and supporting the conservation of cultural heritage sites.

UN General Assembly Resolution 79/220 (2024): Emphasized "Promotion of sustainable and resilient tourism including ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection," highlighting tourism's role in achieving the 2030 Agenda and SDGs.

UN General Assembly Resolution on Return/Restitution of Cultural Property (December 2021): Unanimously adopted with 111 countries' support, addressing illicit trafficking and looting of cultural property, issues intersecting with tourism contexts.

UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017): First Security Council resolution focusing exclusively on cultural heritage, declaring that deliberate heritage destruction constitutes a war crime and recognizing heritage protection as a security imperative inseparable from defending human lives.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Successful Initiatives and Promising Practices

UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (2011-Present): Implemented across multiple regions, the Programme has:

- Integrated sustainable tourism principles into World Heritage Convention mechanisms
- Strengthened enabling environments through policy advocacy and capacity building
- Promoted broad stakeholder engagement in destination-level tourism planning
- Provided site managers with practical capacity and tools for efficient, responsible, sustainable tourism management
- Funded tourism recovery projects enhancing resilience in World Heritage communities (e.g., 2 million euro project funded by Germany's BMZ and implemented by GIZ)
- Successfully piloted destination approaches in Southeast Asia, Mediterranean, Africa, and small island states

Angkor Wat Tourism Management Plan (2012-2020): Multi-stakeholder tourism development strategic plan for the Cambodian World Heritage site, attempting to balance conservation with economic benefits, though challenges remain in managing visitor impacts.

Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) Program: Five-level certification scheme evaluating tourism businesses on environmental, cultural, and social criteria, promoting energy efficiency, water conservation, and community benefit distribution.

The program's documented results include energy and water savings, though independent verification of specific quantified impacts is ongoing.

Slovenia Green Certification (2010s-Present): National sustainability certification scheme evaluating tourism providers and destinations, achieving 250+ certifications and 90% accommodation certification rates, establishing a replicable model for destination-wide sustainability transitions.

Balearic Islands Eco-Tax (2016-Present): Environmental tax generating funds for historical and cultural conservation projects while discouraging excessive tourism; provides revenue model for heritage protection funding.

Venice Day-Visitor Entry Fee (April 2024): Implemented €5-€10 entry fee for day visitors to reduce overcrowding and generate conservation funding, marking the first major city worldwide to establish such a system, though effectiveness in reducing overtourism remains limited as alternative mooring solutions for cruise ships remain unavailable.

New Zealand's Tiaki Promise (2019-Present): Nationwide voluntary pledge by visitors to respect natural and cultural heritage, supported by government infrastructure promoting regional tourism distribution and Māori cultural engagement—demonstrating large-scale behavioral change potential.

Community-Based Tourism Initiatives (Global): Documented successes in:

Indonesia: Youth-led rural CBT organizations generating local employment, income diversification, and improved livelihoods with government support

Kyrgyzstan: CBT offering rural populations economic alternatives to agriculture, preserving cultural heritage through participatory tourism

Multiple African nations: Community conservancies balancing wildlife protection with equitable revenue distribution

Challenges and Limitations of Previous Approaches

1. Implementation Gaps and Capacity Constraints

UNESCO guidelines and frameworks remain largely aspirational. Many developing countries lack:

- Technical expertise to implement carrying capacity studies
- Financial resources to develop tourism infrastructure
- Institutional capacity for multi-stakeholder governance
- Data collection and monitoring systems

2. Weak Enforcement and Voluntary Compliance

International recommendations (UNESCO, UNWTO) lack binding enforcement mechanisms; compliance depends on individual state commitment without accountability structures or sanctions for non-implementation. UNESCO's "List of World Heritage Sites in Danger" designation has moral but limited practical force in preventing continued overtourism.

3. Insufficient Funding for Sustainable Transitions

Developing countries implementing sustainable tourism face significant capital costs for:

- Renewable energy infrastructure retrofitting
- Transportation system upgrades
- Visitor management technology
- Heritage restoration and adaptive capacity

Official Development Assistance for sustainable tourism remains inadequate relative to tourism's economic significance.

4. Community Participation Barriers

- While community-based tourism offers promising models, barriers persist:
- Limited community voice in destination governance dominated by governments and tourism industries
- Insufficient local capacity building and skills development
- Benefits often concentrated among tourism entrepreneurs rather than distributed equitably
- Risk of cultural commodification and loss of authenticity
- Inadequate mechanisms ensuring Indigenous peoples' free prior informed consent

5. Persistent Overtourism Despite Interventions

- Limiting visitor numbers proves politically difficult and economically contentious:
- Cities dependent on tourism tax revenue resist capacity restrictions
- Tourism industries resist entry fees and visitor quotas
- Regional rivalries and uneven implementation create competitive pressures for higher visitor numbers
- Post-COVID recovery surge overwhelmed existing capacity management systems

6. Limited Integration of Climate Considerations

Heritage site management has insufficiently integrated climate adaptation and mitigation:

- Renewable energy integration at heritage sites faces aesthetic and technical constraints
- Visitor transportation emissions - often 70-90% of tourism's carbon footprint-receive inadequate attention
- Climate-informed heritage restoration requires new approaches not yet standardized internationally

7. Regional Fragmentation Without Global Coordination

Different regions adopt divergent sustainable tourism standards and certification schemes (Costa Rica's CST, Slovenia's Green scheme, EU standards), creating compliance complexity and enabling tourism operators to seek less stringent jurisdictions. No unified global monitoring or reporting system exists.

8. Maladaptive Responses in Some Cases

Dispersal strategies promoting "lesser-known" destinations sometimes relocate rather than reduce overtourism problems, shifting damage to new vulnerable sites without addressing underlying demand.

9. COVID-19 Disruption to Implementation

The pandemic interrupted capacity-building projects, tourism recovery prioritized economic rebounds over sustainability, and pent-up travel demand surged beyond the capacity of recovery planning processes.