


EARTHCHECK

Sustainability Storytelling for tourism and hospitality destinations

*How to tell your sustainability
story without greenwashing*



 Azores, Portugal

About the guide

The Sustainability Storytelling Guide for Destinations is a resource designed to assist Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), Chambers of Commerce and Local Governments in crafting and sharing compelling sustainability stories without falling into the trap of 'greenwashing'.

It's a basic framework that covers four steps:



Audiences



Ambitions



Actions



Amplification

There are templates and case studies to help you through, and by the end you should be able to:

- Plan your sustainability ambitions and actions with your audience in mind.
- Align your communications plan with your destination's strategy, management plan and ambitions.
- Identify opportunities to create and curate content with your stakeholders, and without greenwashing the messages while amplifying the action you are taking.

What is sustainable tourism?

Sustainable tourism takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.

Sustainability is a journey, not a singular activity. Progress towards sustainable outcomes can be achieved across the visitor economy – from small towns and beachside escapes to even the biggest cities.

What is regenerative tourism?

Regenerative tourism is a step beyond sustainable tourism. It's a process whereby tourism sector stakeholders exert care and guardianship for the improvement and enhancement of natural, human and human-made elements within a destination, ultimately creating a net gain and enabling these elements to exceed their current survivability conditions.

[Learn more about regenerative tourism.](#)

What is greenwashing?

'Greenwashing' refers to misleading, exaggerated or unsubstantiated environmental claims, in an attempt to create a false impression of the environmental impacts or benefits of a product, service or company.

In 2020, the European Commission found that 53.3% of the 150 environmental claims they examined were vague, misleading or unfounded, and 40% were unsubstantiated.

Greenwashing can cause serious reputational damage to your destination, and in many jurisdictions it now comes with legal repercussions – see 'From greenwashing to greenhushing: What to avoid' on page 14.

Before you begin ...

If your destination is committed to sustainability, and communicating it in the right way, then before you get started it is important to have the right systems in place in your region to deliver real outcomes.

To get started, reflect on if you have in place, or if you need to develop:

- **A sustainability policy or commitment** – an outward-facing document that lets your stakeholders know that you are committed to sustainable action.
- **An understanding of your carbon footprint** – you can't manage what you don't measure. Calculating your footprint helps you to understand where your business impact is and what you can do to address it.
- **A sustainability action plan** – you know and understand what your impact is, so what are the actions you will take to enhance the positive and reduce the negative?

Once these fundamentals are in place, you can add sustainability into your communications plan. That's where this guide can help.

We'll walk you through how to communicate your ambitions and actions with different audiences to maximise your impact and competitive advantage. Sustainability is a journey, so talk about the path that you are taking and the reason why it's important to your destination.

Remember, it is important that you have the evidence in place to back up your claims so measurement becomes an integral part of your sustainability journey.

Contents



Audiences

05

Your audiences and what they need from you.
In this section we'll discuss:

Who can help you?

Who needs to be involved in crafting your sustainability storytelling from the start. And the best way to get them and keep them involved.

- Governments
- Industry and businesses
- Regional or Local Tourism Bodies
- Key individuals
- Internal teams

Who are you talking to?

Who will be on the receiving end of your storytelling, what they need to see, and why.

- Visitors and potential visitors
- Travel trade
- Your community
- What are the storytelling opportunities?



Ambitions

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Communicating your destination's sustainability ambitions.
In this section we'll discuss:

- Articulating your destination's vision for sustainability
- Aligning your vision with your Destination Management Plan and your audiences
- Extracting a messaging and storytelling plan from your ambitions
- Sense checking these with your stakeholders
- What are the storytelling opportunities?



Actions

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Communicating your sustainability actions, progress and outcomes.
In this section we'll discuss:

- Why measuring progress is vital for integrous communication
- Evaluating your sustainability stories for authenticity and impact
- From greenwashing to greenhushing, the common pitfalls to avoid
- Transparency, data and honesty on your business's progress
- What are the storytelling opportunities?



Amplify


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Crafting and curating sustainability stories from your destination.
In this section we'll discuss:

- Telling transparent, authentic stories
- Enabling a culture of storytelling in your business
- The narratives, content formats and amplification tactics you can use to help get stories heard
- Community management - how to make it all fit together
- Case studies to inspire your business

Audiences



 Noosa, Australia

Who can help you?

To create compelling sustainability stories, it's crucial to engage key stakeholders from the very start.

Your stakeholders can help create, format and amplify your destination's sustainability message. They also hold the keys to uncovering the hidden gems of sustainability within your destination.

Working alongside these different audiences is rarely simple – time, resources and sustainability maturity will all be in conflict. Your goal is to identify the stakeholders who align, offer a sustainable visitor journey and can help move your storytelling forward.

It takes time and endurance – but the payoff of authenticity, buy-in and increased reach is worth it.

GOVERNMENTS

Your government relationships can drive and expand the reach of your sustainability stories. Local, state and national governments embrace sustainability messages, so seek their support to showcase the operators with great sustainability stories in your destination.

Collaborate with them on your messages – building a long term relationship supports grant and funding options.

INDUSTRY AND BUSINESSES

Work with businesses in your destination to develop your vision for sustainability. Get their buy-in so they embrace the opportunity. Listen to their concerns and ideas, and highlight successful case studies to inspire others.

This is your opportunity to find those businesses who have great sustainable management practices in place, but may not know how to tell their own story.

Telling their stories is the most authentic way of communicating sustainability.

It supports your goals and delivers a depth of experience for visitors through curated itineraries and promotional opportunities.

DMOS (DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS)

Collaborate with your DMO at state, regional, local or council level to ensure your sustainability story reaches a broader audience. Joint initiatives and campaigns can amplify the impact of your message. Cross-boundary collaboration can provide potential visitors with longer itineraries that keep them longer and get them to spend more. Consider how you promote or prioritise those with shared values.

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Identify influential figures who are passionate about sustainability. A local member of government, a passionate business person, a local character who does things differently – enlist their support in becoming ambassadors for your destination's storytelling.

INTERNAL TEAMS

Your internal team members are the backbone of your storytelling efforts. Ensure they are well-versed in your sustainability vision and are actively engaged in promoting it. Consider your own internal actions and align them to your sustainability ambition including your own sustainability commitment, training opportunities and how you promote your story.

For more, you can see our *Sustainability Storytelling Guide for Tourism and Hospitality Operators*.



Who are you talking to?

VISITORS AND POTENTIAL VISITORS

Your visitors care about the environmental and social impacts of their choices when they travel. More than three-quarters of people want to make their holiday travel sustainable.*

Equally, visitors are not willing to visit places that they perceive as participating in greenwashing, with seven in 10 actively avoiding a destination where they believe the sustainability claims are false. Seek to address their sustainability needs and wants when they are looking for inspiration and planning their trips.

That means your campaigns, social media content, partnerships and your website should all address their sustainability wants and needs.

Iceland has a pledge for visitors that serves as a friendly, good-natured reminder of how they can help:

The Icelandic Pledge

- I pledge to be a responsible tourist.
- When I explore new places, I will leave them as I found them.
- I will take photos to die for, without dying for them.
- I will follow the road into the unknown, but never venture off the road.
- And I will only park where I am meant to.
- When I sleep out under the stars, I'll stay within a camp site.
- And when nature calls, I won't answer the call on nature.
- I will be prepared for all weathers, all possibilities and all adventures.

TRAVEL TRADE

Communicate your destination's sustainability efforts to tour operators, travel agents, and other travel professionals. Showcase hero businesses, and emphasise the value of promoting sustainable tourism options to their clients.

YOUR COMMUNITY

Involve your local community in the storytelling process. Celebrate their contributions to sustainability and show how responsible tourism benefits them directly. Your Visitors, Friends and Relatives (VFR) market is usually valuable and your community is your destination's best ambassadors. How can they be involved?

Storytelling opportunities

GROUP THE SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT CHOICES ON YOUR WEBSITE

Show your stakeholders their sustainability stories will be seen and heard, and give travellers planning their trip a simple way to see who walks the talk within your destination. Build itineraries around your sustainability champions. Consider filter options on your platform to make it as simple as possible for potential visitors to engage with businesses that are leading the way.

SUCCESS STORIES

Highlight your sustainable stakeholders in campaigns – show how they have positively impacted your destination and communities. Consider blog posts or video content that builds a narrative for potential visitors, and urges other businesses to tell their stories. It should be easy to find – take the quick and easy website points below from Thredbo, a village and ski resort in Australia.

The Environment

Thredbo operates within Kosciuszko National Park, one of Australia's most beautiful and sensitive natural settings. Our innovative environmental initiatives cover all aspects of resort operations so we can preserve our unique alpine backyard for future generations.

Community

Thredbo understands caring for the environment is a team effort. We work in collaboration with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Thredbo community, Red Energy, Snowy Hydro, and local non-profit groups to protect the mountains we value so much.

Leadership

Thredbo is Australia's first snow resort to have its major operations powered by renewable electricity and to achieve Gold EarthCheck Certification three years running, setting a new benchmark for environmental sustainability within the snow industry and protecting our environment into the future.


EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Create informative content that educates both visitors and residents about the importance of sustainable tourism and ways they can contribute. Show off any sustainable certifications you have.

For instance, Baião, a municipality in Portugal, welcomes visitors with a billboard that proudly displays their EarthCheck Certification, and provides links to where visitors can learn more about the region's sustainability initiatives.

Ambitions



 Zurich, Switzerland



Articulating your destination's ambition for sustainability

You need to start somewhere. Ambitions are powerful in sustainability storytelling because they declare your intentions.

But with the passing of the EU's Green Claims Directive (see page 14), vague statements like 'eco' and 'natural' are no longer enough – you need real targets and initiatives, and you need to be able to support them with real action and data.

With a bit of luck, there may already be a vision from your regional government that you can align with, helping to deliver their plan for sustainability where you can. But the maturity of this plan may vary, and you may need to translate it into communications that your other stakeholders can understand. Now, let's create an ambition statement.

"[Destination] is an eco destination."

It's fine, but what does it mean? *How* is it an eco destination? It's your job to extract the goals for your destination and find the stories that align. Doing so under a unifying statement is a lot easier:

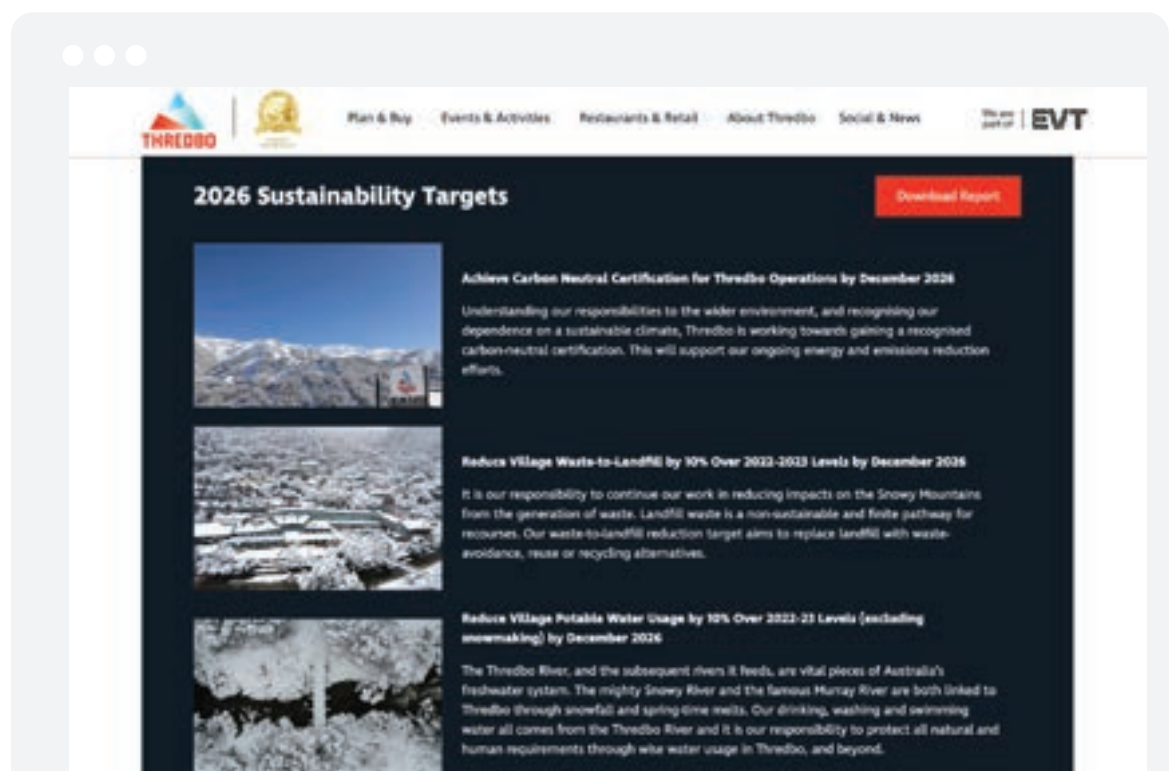
"[Destination] will be a carbon neutral city by 2050. Here's the people helping us get there."

A good SMART vision statement: Specific. Measurable. Achievable. Relevant. Timely.

Here's a great example from Thredbo.

It may be aligned to Government ambition (decarbonisation), or if they are yet to commit, you may take the lead here.

Articulating your ambition like this puts your destination stakeholders on the same page. But Remember – ambition is nothing without action. So avoid talking about ambitions that aren't realistic or achievable.





ALIGNING YOUR VISION WITH YOUR DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLAN, GOVERNMENT AMBITION AND AUDIENCES

Your sustainability vision should seamlessly integrate into your Destination Management Plan. Be guided by it and don't over-promise. This alignment ensures that sustainable practices are not just an afterthought but woven into the fabric of your destination's growth. It allows for advocacy, development and prioritisation.

EXTRACTING A MESSAGING AND STORYTELLING PLAN

Now that you have your audiences mapped, are engaged with stakeholders and your storytelling has a direction thanks to your sustainability vision statement, you can start to plan your messaging and content.

[Use this template as a basis](#), or simply integrate this into your destination's existing content calendar as a sustainability pillar.

SENSE CHECKING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Before finalising your messaging and storytelling plan, seek feedback from your partners, stakeholders, and community members. This process ensures that your narrative is wellreceived and aligned with their values and how your destination actually interacts with visitors.

Storytelling opportunities

INTERACTIVE EVENTS


Host workshops, seminars, or events focused on sustainability, bringing together stakeholders and visitors to engage in meaningful discussions, capacity building and goal alignment. This is where you sense-check your ambitions and ask them to help craft the messages and stories that align.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Encourage partners and visitors to share their sustainable travel experiences on social media, creating an authentic and relatable narrative. Ensure your team is monitoring for these stories using social media tools.

Actions



 County Clare, Ireland



As the custodian of your destination's sustainability stories, it's vital to have the ability to assess stories from stakeholders.

If these stories align with your goals, that's great. However, it's equally important to evaluate whether their actions and progress can withstand the scrutiny of visitors and other stakeholders. Arm yourself with data and insights from your stakeholders to ensure that these narratives are not only compelling, but are also integrous.

Measuring progress

Accurate measurement is key to credible communication. It enables you to evaluate good sustainability stories and report on victories and progress.

You can measure your destination's progress in a number of ways:

- Carbon footprint for the destination (and your offices too)
- Operators engaged with certification schemes and measuring their footprint
- Social contribution of the tourism industry
- Economic impact of tourism

Regularly reviewing and reporting on these metrics can form the basis of your ongoing sustainability storytelling, and ensure transparency and accountability.

Don't be scared to celebrate wins, or to share progress on initiatives that haven't quite hit the mark. Embracing transparency not only builds trust, but also reinforces your credibility, as is the case with this example from the Azores, Portugal:

40% of the electricity produced in the Azores is from renewables, in 2010 the amount was 28%.

Evaluating sustainability stories for authenticity and impact

Authenticity is vital, so your stories should reflect your destination's real-world actions and impacts. Avoid exaggeration or misleading information. Instead, focus on genuine efforts and achievements, even if they seem small.

Use this checklist to tell if your stories have:

- Accurate and specific claims
- Quantifiable metrics
- Transparency
- Third-party verification
- Educating and engaging content
- Avoided greenwashing language
- Encouraged feedback

To evaluate the marketing impact of your stories, consider how they resonate with your audience.

- Do they inspire action?
- Do they deepen understanding of sustainability?
- Do they reinforce your destination's commitment to sustainability?

Use audience feedback and engagement metrics to assess the impact of your stories and adjust your approach as needed.



From greenwashing to greenhushing: What to avoid

Legislation is being introduced around the world to stop greenwashing.

For instance, the European Commission recently introduced the Green Claims Directive, which states that environmental claims may only be made if they meet minimum criteria and are independently verified by a third party assessment body.

Under the Directive, terms such as 'environmentally friendly', 'natural', 'biodegradable', 'climate neutral' and 'eco' cannot be used without evidence. Carbon offsetting schemes, which have often been used to justify labeling products and services as 'carbon neutral', cannot be used to substantiate the claims.

In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is weighing major changes to its Green Guides, a set of standards for companies making environmental claims. The Green Guides are non-binding, but are often cited in class action litigation when companies are accused of greenwashing. The changes would clarify when deceptive marketing around sustainability and environmental responsibility violates federal law.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has also released its own draft guidelines on making solid sustainability claims.

These laws and guidelines seek to protect consumers and the environment, and support genuinely sustainable businesses that can verify their claims.

To maintain credibility and trust with your audience, and to avoid legal repercussions, it's crucial to avoid unethical communication practices, such as:

Greenwashing

Making unsubstantiated or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product, service or company.

Greenshifting

Shifting the focus to less harmful practices while continuing more harmful ones.

Greencrowding

Promoting a small number of genuinely sustainable practices while ignoring other harmful practices.

Greenlabelling

Using ambiguous or misleading labels to give the impression of environmental friendliness.

Greenlighting

Presenting a company as environmentally friendly when its overall impact is negative.

Greenrinsing

Diverting attention from negative environmental impacts through charitable donations or sponsorships.

At the same time, it's important to avoid 'greenhushing' – staying silent about genuine sustainability achievements, often due to fear of criticism for not doing enough.

Instead, strive for transparency, honesty, and continuous improvement in your sustainability journey.



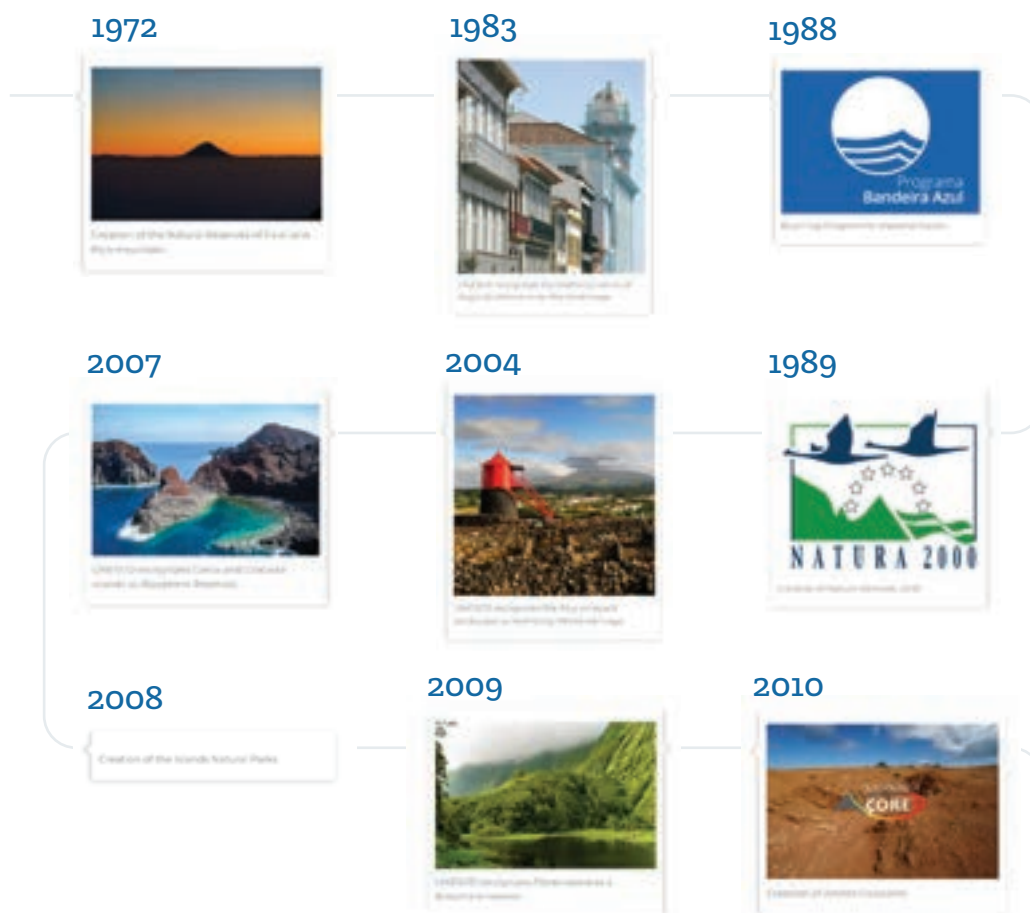
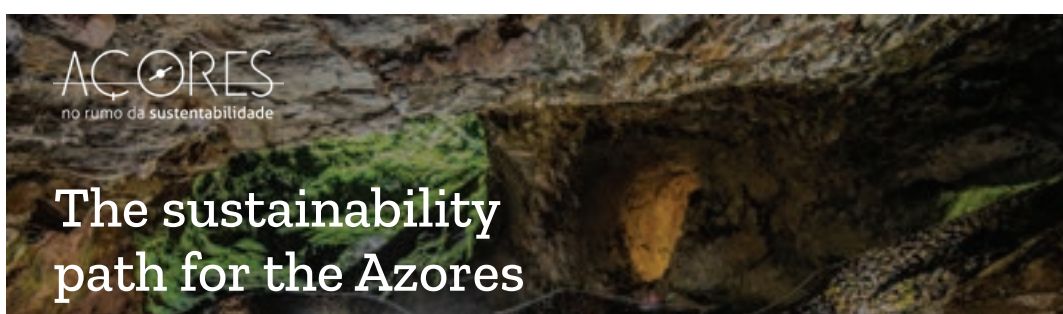
Transparency, data, and honesty on your destination's progress

Building trust with your audience involves embracing transparency, data, and honesty in your approach.

Be open about your sustainability goals, actions, and progress. Use data to substantiate your claims and provide a clear picture of your impact. Check that your operators and those you are working with are doing the same.

Be honest about the challenges you face and the mistakes you make. This not only demonstrates your commitment to learning and improvement, but it also makes your sustainability journey relatable and engaging for your audience.


Remember, sustainability is a journey, not a single action. The goal is not to be perfect, but to continuously strive for better.



See the full sustainability path at <https://sustainable.azores.gov.pt/en/the-sustainability-path/>

Amplify



 Gero, Japan



You've planned, prepped your team, engaged your partners, set your ambitions and learned how best to speak about sustainability. You've also hopefully started posting about these things on your owned and social accounts, and across your marketing assets.

TELL TRANSPARENT AND AUTHENTIC STORIES

Authenticity and transparency are key to effective sustainability storytelling. Share stories that truly reflect your destination's actions, progress, and impact. Be honest about the challenges you face and the mistakes you make. This not only builds trust with your audience but also makes your stories more relatable and engaging.

Use data to substantiate your stories and provide a clear picture of your impact. But remember, sustainability stories are not just about numbers. They're also about people, communities, and ecosystems. So balance your data with human stories to create a deep emotional connection with your audience.

ENABLING A CULTURE OF STORYTELLING IN YOUR DESTINATION

Empowering your team to share your message, beyond the confines of key messages or advertisements, is absolutely crucial.

When your destination stakeholders are enabled to share their stories, authenticity shines through. Make sure they know who to contact directly or tag on social media to share their stories and truly be heard.

Encourage your internal business divisions (Events, Investment Attraction, Tourism, for example) to share their own sustainability stories, whether they're about implementing a new sustainable practice, engaging with the local community, or learning something new about sustainability.

Creating a dedicated space for these stories, whether it's a section in your internal newsletter, a designated channel on your team communication platform, or a regular slot in team meetings, can help cultivate this culture. These stories can then be curated and shared with your wider audience, including your visitors and operators. This approach provides a diverse and authentic picture of your sustainability journey.

If sustainability is really important to you, create a space for your vision and action plan in your destination management plan. This is the advocacy document for your region and speaks directly to where sustainability sits in your priorities.



The narratives, content formats, and amplification tactics

There are numerous ways to structure your sustainability stories. You can choose to focus on the journey – where you started, where you are, and where you're headed.

NARRATIVES

Use the structure of this guide to build your narratives:

Audiences - Tell stories about the people and operators helping your destination become sustainable. Highlight the stakeholders coming along for the ride.

Ambitions - Tell your visitors, community and operators your plan. State your ambitions and why – and back them up with how you'll get there.

Actions - Show the progress on your ambitions. Celebrate your wins, and even if you haven't got to where you want to be, you can be transparent about how things are going.

CONTENT FORMATS

Different content formats can be used to tell your stories in engaging ways. This might include:

- Blog posts
- Videos
- Infographics
- Case studies
- Social media posts such as Instagram Stories and Reels, TikToks and more
- Newsletters
- Podcasts

Choose formats that best suit your story, your audience, and your platforms.

AMPLIFICATION TACTICS

There are multiple tactics you can use to amplify your stories. These might include employing SEO (search engine optimisation) to reach a broader audience through search, using social media marketing to engage your current followers and extend your reach, leveraging PR to secure media coverage, establishing content partnerships to access new audiences, implementing

email marketing to engage your existing audience, and more.

Encourage your stakeholders to embed their sustainability narrative and credentials when their information is distributed to booking agents and across third-party distributors.

And don't forget, your stakeholders and partners are excellent sources of amplification. They have existing audiences and connections that can help send your sustainability stories far and wide.

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Community management is about nurturing relationships with your audience. It involves listening to your audience, engaging in conversations, providing valuable content, and facilitating a sense of community.

In the context of sustainability communication, community management can help ensure your messages are well received, your audience is engaged, and your efforts are amplified.

Regularly share your sustainability stories with your community, invite feedback, answer questions, and encourage discussion. This two-way communication can help build a strong, engaged community that supports and amplifies your sustainability efforts.

CASE STUDIES TO INSPIRE YOUR BUSINESS

The case studies included in this guide provide real-world examples of businesses that have effectively communicated their sustainability stories. They highlight different approaches, challenges, and successes, offering valuable insights and inspiration for your own sustainability communication.

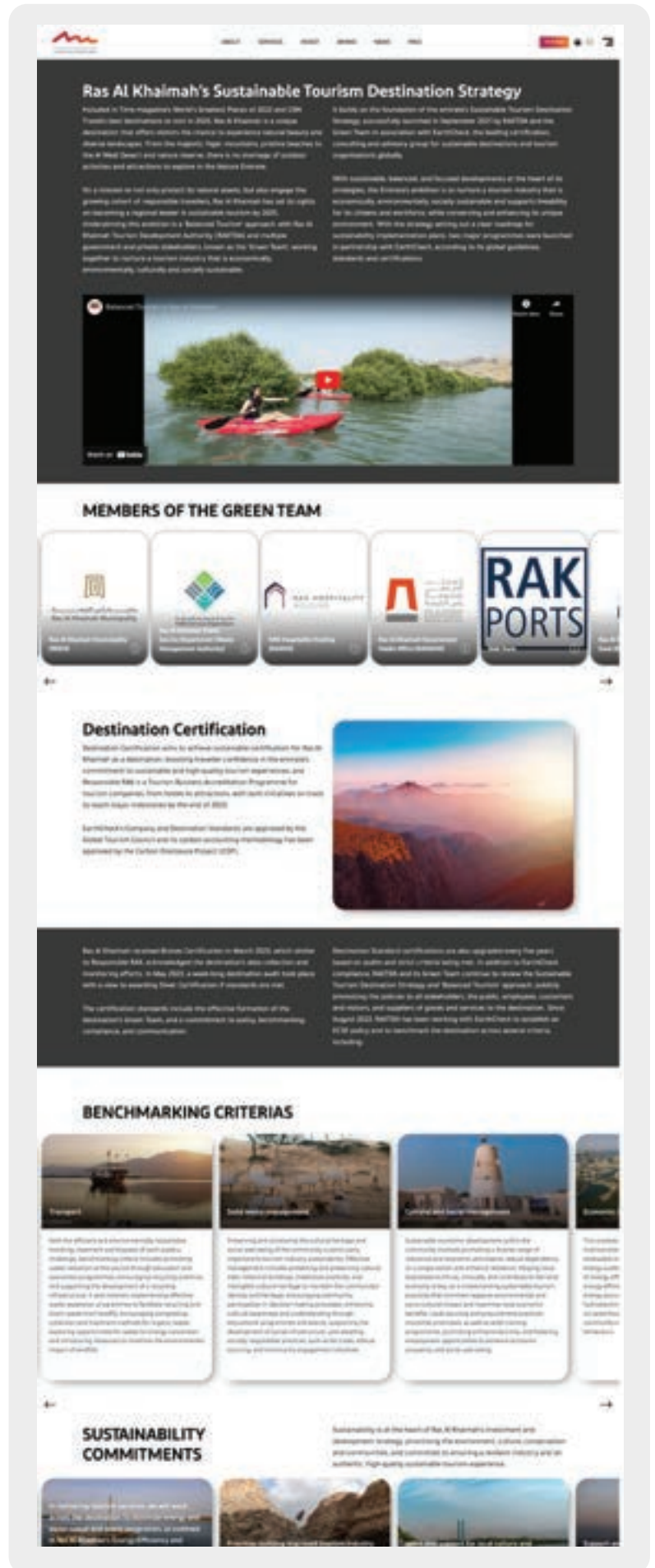
CASE STUDY: RAS AL KHAIMAH

How Ras Al Khaimah celebrates sustainability

Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), one of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates, has set its sights on becoming a regional leader in sustainability by 2025.

To that end, the emirate has started its own sustainability certification program for tourism operators, ResponsibleRAK. The program is run locally but powered by EarthCheck's science and data, ensuring businesses are measuring their environmental impact across several verifiable criteria and taking real action.

The Responsible RAK site clearly lays out RAK's sustainability commitments and benchmarking criterias, and shines a spotlight on local tourism businesses that have achieved Responsible RAK certification.



CASE STUDY: THREDBO

How Thredbo walks the talk on its sustainability commitments and actions

Thredbo – an EarthCheck Certified village and ski resort in Australia – wears its heart on its sleeve with its sustainability commitments and communication.

Powered by renewable energy, Thredbo Resort is committed to preserving, protecting, and prioritising its unique alpine environment.

Thredbo champions achievements made in resort, and doesn't shy away from highlighting ongoing commitments to sustainable futures. .

Thredbo uses educational resources to support its efforts and to engage businesses. [It also uses other channels such as YouTube to promote its story.](#)

2026 Sustainability Targets

- Achieve Carbon Neutral Certification for Thredbo Operations by December 2026**
Understanding our responsibilities to the wider environment, and adopting our operations as a sustainable climate, Thredbo is making towards positive environmental contributions. This will support our ongoing energy and emissions reduction efforts.
- Reduce Village Waste-to-Landfill by 9% Over 2022-2026 Levels by December 2026**
It is our responsibility to continue our work in reducing impacts on the Snowy Mountains from the generation of waste. Landfill waste is a less sustainable and faster pathway for resources. Our waste-to-landfill reduction target aims to reduce landfill with waste diversion, reuse or recycling alternatives.
- Reduce Village Potable Water Usage by 9% Over 2022-2026 Levels (excluding swimming) by December 2026**
The Thredbo River, and the subsequent Snowy 2 Needs, are vital pieces of Australia's freshwater system. The mighty Snowy River and the Snowy Plains River are both linked to Thredbo through seasonal and springtime flows. Our drinking, watering and swimming water all comes from the Thredbo River and it is our responsibility to protect all related water requirements through our water usage in Thredbo, year-round.

The screenshot shows the 'Environment & Sustainability' page of the Thredbo website. The header includes navigation links like 'Play & Stay', 'Events & Activities', 'Reservations & Book', 'About Thredbo', and 'Guest & Host'. The main heading is 'Environment & Sustainability' with the subtext 'Thredbo Powered by Renewable Energy'. Below this, there are three columns of content with icons representing different sustainability goals: 'Carbon Footprint', 'Water Sustainability Targets', and 'Waste Reduction'. A large image of a snowy mountain landscape is featured with the text: 'Securing powered by renewable energy has been our goal for some time now and by achieving this we've set the environmental benchmark for Australian resorts. We are extremely proud to be at the forefront of reducing our carbon footprint into the future.' Below this, there are sections for 'Renewable Now' and 'EarthCheck | Gold Certification'.

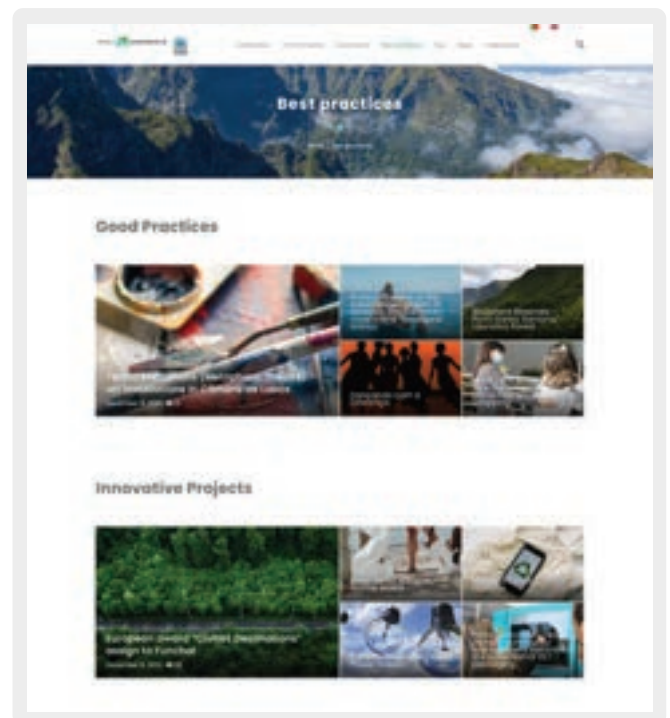
CASE STUDY: MADEIRA

How Madeira articulates its goals

An Autonomous Region of Portugal, Madeira is a mountainous archipelago known for its award-winning wine, fertile volcanic soils, rich cultural heritage and breathtaking natural beauty.

An EarthCheck Certified sustainable tourism destination, Madeira clearly articulates its journey towards becoming a more sustainable archipelago on its 'Madeira - Sustainable For All' website.



Madeira also uses this site to spotlight sustainable practices and innovative projects that are helping the archipelago move closer to its goals.





EARTHCHECK

 5/189 Grey St,
South Brisbane QLD 4101

 (07) 3924 4200
 relationshipmgt@earthcheck.org
