

Sustainable Tourism Practices

Questions for Tour Operators

Definition of Sustainable Tourism (UNWTO):

"**Tourism** that 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"

Why planners promoting and managing educational travel should ask these questions of their travel purveyors/operators:

The majority of institutions and travelers believe in the positive power of travel to protect the environment and cultural heritage of destinations and benefit local people for future generations to enjoy. In some cases, tourism has negative impacts and responsible travel practices seek to minimize those impacts, while trying to maximize the benefits.

Travelers are increasingly aware and concerned about environmental and cultural impacts. The majority of travelers are eager to have travel experiences that are based on responsible practices and provide benefits to the destination and minimize harm. Additionally, elements of sustainable tourism practices provide meaning and purpose to the travel experience, directly relating to authenticity, a quality that is more and more sought after, particularly for the educational traveler.

Therefore, many institutions, in the interest of the educational mission overall and their institutional commitments to sustainability, are eager to inform travelers about their travel partners practices towards low impact, no impact or impact recovery in destinations.

Institutions seek marketing materials about their travel programs that enhance their identity, showcase their value and commitment towards responsible business practices, and align with the mission of their institution.

Therefore, having tour operators provide this information is both educational and responsible, and a step in identifying what planners can do better to raise awareness of current and future sustainability initiatives.

In order to assist travel planners with questions to ask of their operators and suppliers, the questions below are grouped into the key areas of sustainable travel; economic, environmental, and socio-cultural:

ECONOMIC

Maximizing Social and Economic Benefits Investing in the areas where your tours operate

1) Does your tourism business support community development initiatives in the destinations where you operate?

(Ex: Do you support or collaborate with local organizations involved with education and micro-enterprise development, health care initiatives, educational opportunities in the destination, profit that goes back to the local community, etc.)

2) To support the local economy, does your tourism business maximize efforts to source locally?

(Ex: fair-trade purchasing, purchase locally-made crafts, supplies, mentor local artisans, support local food providers, etc.)

3) Does your tourism business maximize efforts to promote good governance, hire local people based on fair wages and benefits, including opportunities for staff training and career advancement?

(Ex: hire local staff in ports of call or sites visited, mentor or train these staff in the destination, include community leaders/groups in decision making regarding projects that will affect their community/surrounding areas, etc.)

ENVIRONMENTAL

Green Operations: On the trips, and in the office Establishing guidelines to manage your environmental impacts

1) Do you reduce, reuse, and recycle?

(Ex: reduce waste, reduce/recycle paper and plastic products, eliminate single use plastics, avoid Styrofoam, eliminate plastic straws, use non-toxic cleaning products, home offices/telecommuting, print on recycled paper, use biodegradable ink, office recycling, rechargeable batteries, donate used linens, properly dispose of shipboard waste, etc.)

2) Do you engage in energy conservation efforts?

(Ex: on ships, in hotels or in the office: monitor for energy efficiency, track energy to reduce use, turn off lights, shut off air conditioning/heating systems when spaces are not in use, etc.)

3) Do you engage in water conservation efforts?

(Ex: reduce water use where possible, recycle gray water for irrigation, use rain water catchment, etc.)

4) Are you actively engaged in efforts to monitor your carbon footprint to reduce negative impacts on climate change?

(Ex: use fuel efficient and/or electric, hybrid vehicles, engage in reforestation efforts, use renewable energy, source food locally to reduce food miles, have implementations in new ships, collaborations with carbon-neutral companies, purchase carbon offsets, offer incentives for employees – or guest/travelers - to carpool or use public transportation, plant native trees, only offer small group tours, etc.)

5) Do you provide clients/travelers information, tips and training on how to be more environmentally responsible and offer training and information internally to you staff?
(Ex: a sustainability management plan, compliance with environmental policies, benchmarks for environmental performance, etc.)

6) Does your tourism business contribute to efforts to protect the natural environment and/or support biodiversity conservation?
(Ex: contribute to conservation, wildlife protection, local organizations and social causes, support scientific research, engage in habitat restoration, etc.)

SOCIO-CULTURAL

Maximize Social Benefit Support Cultural and Natural Heritage

1) Do you educate your clients/travelers on ways your business minimizes negative impacts on local communities and drives inclusive development?
(Ex: guidelines for appropriate visitor social behavior, respect for tradition and well-being of residence, encourage purchase of local products to support the local community, select service providers that hires local employees, receive feedback from local communities)

2) Does your tourism business contribute to initiatives/efforts to support cultural heritage, including support and education about historical, archeological, and/or culturally important sites, contemporary culture i.e. art, events, and traditions?
(Ex: adhere to recommendations for site protection and regional plans for tourism visitation, transparency about negative and positive socio-economic and cultural impacts of tourism, strengthen local communities through authentic cultural exchanges, increase opportunities for education and job training for qualified staff.)

3) Does your tourism business promote “sense of place” and authenticity that embraces cultural heritage, either directly or through your business partners?
(Examples: visit restaurants that specialize in local culinary traditions, stay in lodges and hotels that reflect local cultural design, art, music, and blend with the natural surroundings, inform guests of cultural or religious issues where they should be considerate of host, ensure that no behavior exploits children or violate human rights conduct, etc.)