

## The bright future of sustainable tourism

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The United Nations' World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines sustainable tourism as "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."

It is a vision of a better tourism industry, with sustainability as a core value that underpins all businesses, with courageous leaders who use the power of business to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advance circularity, contribute to conservation and operate with Net Zero emissions. They care for their community and support diversity, equity and inclusion, hire locals first, train to hone vocation and life-skills, and support local suppliers with shared values. They value stakeholder trust, offer authentic experiences that create joy and meaningful connections that engage with local life and nature, and provide comfort and service in a responsible way.

Sustainable tourism is a term that means different things to different owners and operators in this fragmented tourism industry and therefore risks becoming meaningless if greenwashing is allowed to continue. There must be a commitment to get the basics right such as accountable and transparent action rather than cursory conversations, to go beyond small-scale actions, to take responsibility for total impacts in the places where owners and brands operate and **achieve Climate Positive** before the global carbon budget runs out in **just over 6 years**.

In these most urgent of times, we are living in a polarised world with a crisis of trust and human-induced climate emergencies. A growing population is rapidly exceeding its capacity. Out of the 25 countries considered the most vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change, 14 are currently experiencing conflict. Consumer consumption is excessive, and our carbonised lifestyle is pitted against a fragile environment.

Token sustainable tourism will not solve this crisis and all stakeholders need to step up and action sustainable development with accountability and transparency to achieve success at the scale we need.

- Governments worldwide should intensify scrutiny and adopt a rigorous **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive** to put a stop to greenwashing, unsustainable practices and human rights violations; and reward companies that achieve Climate Positive before our carbon budget runs out.
- **Government** tourism authorities should only develop tourism projects within the parameters of sustainable development, establish the regulations and financial structures to build thriving communities. limit growth to prevent environmental degradation and build resilience to tackle climate change.
- The tourism industry should prioritise the education of responsible tourism and sustainability with science-based targets adjusted to the most recent UN Climate Report. Hotel operators and their teams have the ability and power to create change and ensure that any guests who are sceptical about climate change when they arrive, are a champion to the cause when they leave.
- Tourism businesses, as well as tourism schools and hospitality institutions, should demonstrate commitment to accountable and transparent science-backed sustainability with long-term thinking over short-term gain, and play a leading role in addressing societal problems. It is vital for education establishments to 'walk the talk' and credibly lead by example before they teach and preach sustainability to future leaders and their alumni. In addition to planning and creating organisational practices, a wider team should be trained to build capacity and more emphasis should be placed on the resources necessary to enable them to follow through on sustainability initiatives.

Richard Edelman, the CEO of global communications firm Edelman that has published the annual survey on trust for the past 23 years, points out where we need to start: "Trust enables action and action builds trust. The precondition for trust is a system that works for all."



The **23rd Edelman Trust Barometer** survey, published in January 2023, spotlights the gravity of the trust crisis and reveals four key findings and the way forward:

1. **The social fabric weakens.** Amid deepening divisions and a lack of faith in societal institutions triggered by economic anxiety, disinformation, mass-class divide and a failure of leadership has brought us to where we are today – deeply and dangerously polarised. Business is the only institution seen as competent and ethical. 53% of respondents globally say that their countries are more divided today than in the past. CEOs are obligated to improve economic optimism and hold divisive forces accountable.

**The way forward: Business is expected to act.** As the most trusted institution in 2022, businesses should leverage their comparative advantage to inform, debate and deliver solutions on climate, on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and skill training. **To do:** Measure Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) to demonstrate societal impacts. Make DEI a fundamental part of global business strategy.

2. **The economic optimism collapses.** People are now fearing for their economic future without a trust safety net and only 40% of respondents say they and their families will be better off in five years, a 10-point decline from 2022.

**The way forward: Restore economic optimism. To do:** Invest in fair compensation, training and local communities to address the mass-class divide and the cycle of polarisation.

3. **Distrust breeds polarisation.** Very few would help, live near, or work with someone who disagreed with their point of view.

**The way forward: Collaborate with government.** Business and government can build consensus and collaborate to deliver **results** that push us towards a more just, secure and thriving society. **To do:** Work with and not against government, especially on policies that raise living standards, offer opportunities for continuing education/reskilling, and improve public safety, privacy and security.

4. **Great expectations result in heightened risk for business.** Among those who see their country as polarised, the employer is the only trusted institution. While people want business to do more on social issues, it risks being politicised when engaging on contentious issues.

**The way forward: Advocate for the truth.** Be a source of reliable information, promote civil discourse, and hold false information sources accountable. **To do:** Hold divisive forces accountable. Pull advertising money from media platforms that spread disinformation.

Tourism needs thriving communities and a healthy environment, and the weather has a significant impact on tourism flows in the origin, as well as in the destination area. According to the April 2022 UN Climate Report, it is now inevitable that we will reach and surpass 1.5°C this decade, when the heat will push many of the natural systems that sustain us past a dangerous turning point and many climate impacts – on balance – can go from destructive to catastrophic.

**Believe that the future is worth fighting for.** We have all the solutions we need and **we know our limited timeline.** Actioning accountable and transparent sustainability on time with a holistic approach focused on commerce for business viability and resilience, on community wellbeing, on the conservation of biodiversity in nature, on culture preservation, and on carbon reduction before offsetting to be **climate positive** is the path we must take to achieve a climate-safe, **regenerative future** that is more just. This is the bright future of sustainable tourism.

About the author

Onno Poortier is the chairman and CEO of It Must Be NOW, a leadership platform and facilitator that exists to help hospitality companies, tourism facilities and educational establishments to advance sustainability and achieve Climate Positive with accountability and transparency.

He has been a hotelier for more than fifty years and served as board director and chairman in the luxury hotel sector and marketing alliances worldwide.

He is offering the **NOW Climate Positive Program & Award** to enable hotel owners and operators to move beyond small-scale actions, take responsibility for total impacts and accelerate to Climate Positive, and to support the UN SDGs towards a just and regenerative world. ([itmustbeNOW.com](http://itmustbeNOW.com))