

An aerial photograph of a dark lake surrounded by a dense forest. The trees are in the peak of autumn, showing vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red. A small building and a road are visible on the forested shore.

# **A Practical Guide to Destination Stewardship and Sustainable Tourism**

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# Getting Started: A Quick Primer on Sustainable Development Through Tourism and Destination Stewardship

Embracing sustainability as a core component of the work of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is the next stage in developing the tourism industry. This document is designed to highlight some emerging thinking on how tourism and DMOs can contribute to the sustainable development of destination communities.

## Sustainable Tourism and Destination Stewardship

Sustainable tourism and destination stewardship are not a simple set of activities that you can simply add to your checklist and then check off. Sustainable tourism principles and practices must become part of your DMO/Destination DNA – embedded in everything you do. It's like how manufacturing companies embrace quality in all their processes or Captain America changes from weakling to superhero.

The good news is that you and your industry probably do more than you realize. Maine Office of Tourism (MOT) has promoted authentic experiences and natural places for years. Its marketing communications and destination development efforts are solid foundations on which to build sustainable tourism programs. Importantly, enthusiasm for sustainability is evident in our discussions with the Maine tourism stakeholders.

This guidebook introduces key concepts of sustainable tourism and destination stewardship and suggests some practical ways that MOT and the regional DMOs of Maine can work toward sustainable development.

## Why promote and encourage tourism?

In recent years, the rationale of tourism promotion has faced increasing scrutiny. While traditional thinking has assumed that more visitors lead to more economic benefits for destinations, communities are increasingly recognizing that to achieve the best possible outcomes from tourism, work must be done to maximize the benefits – economic, social, and environmental.

In planning for tourism development, it is essential to consider the question: “Why do we promote tourism?” The answer goes deeper than increasing visitor spending or even creating jobs. For many destinations – the ultimate solution is to improve the quality of life of folks in the community. In Maine's case, this means the quality of life of the people of Maine.

Quality of life in communities is often described as a strong economy, a rich cultural/social life, and a healthy environment. It's essential to recognize that dimensions of quality of life are embedded in sustainability and destination stewardship discussions. Sustainable tourism and destination stewardship require a portfolio of actions—planning, programming, and performance management—that contribute to the quality of life in Maine communities. Tourism, managed responsibly and sustainably, improves the lives of the people of Maine.

## Tourism as a driver for socio-economic development

Tourism generates economic benefits for destinations when visitors spend money in the destination and that money stays in the community. This visitor spending directly supports



hospitality, recreation, food service, and retail businesses. Visitor expenditure directly impacts cultural and heritage organizations such as museums, festivals, and parks. Tourism indirectly benefits a wide range of supply chain organizations, including local farms, service organizations, and other suppliers. Visitors from out of the region bring “new” money into the economy. When international visitors spend money in a destination, they generate export earnings. All these economic activities generate both direct and indirect employment.

Strategies designed to maximize visitor expenditure, rather than merely focusing on the increased numbers, generate better outcomes for destinations. DMOs should focus on developing a target market portfolio that generates maximum value for the destination. For many destinations, fewer visitors spending more is a better option than many visitors spending little. Profitless volume, driven by a focus on passenger numbers rather than the economic contribution of each visitor, is unsustainable.

It is important to remember that the economic benefit of tourism is maximized when the money spent remains within the local economy. Economic leakage—money that leaves the community—reduces the benefits of tourism. Again, DMOs can adopt strategies to ensure the money stays in the community. Examples of these strategies are:

- Encouraging “Buy Local”
- Highlighting unique products from the destination
- Promoting local artists and crafts through campaigns, awards programs, etc.

Tourism activities support other economic development activities. Enhancing the community’s destination asset creates a more appealing destination for other businesses. The lifestyle supported by a sustainable visitor economy attracts people considering moving to the community. As we will see in the next section, destination stewardship and sustainable development through tourism improve the quality of life in a destination.

## Sustainable tourism

The term sustainability is frequently misunderstood, and any discussion of sustainability and stewardship benefits from a quick review. The three key components of the definition of sustainable tourism are:

- **Simultaneously short and long-term focus.** The focus of sustainable tourism actions is on the issues facing tourism today and the future. There is no question that tourism organizations, including the many small and medium enterprises that make up the majority of businesses in the sector, must be viable and meet short term challenges. Sustainable tourism practices are designed to support these businesses. At the same time, sustainable tourism practices take a long-term view to ensure the destination remains as appealing in the future as it is today. Sustainable tourism ensures that folks won’t say, “I used to go there, but it’s not as good as it used to be.”
- **Balancing impacts of tourism for the best possible outcome.** Enhancing the benefits of tourism and reducing the negative impacts is the goal of sustainable tourism, which acknowledges that while tourism can generate various benefits for destination communities, these benefits often come with negative impacts. A sustainable tourism

approach recognizes that to generate the best outcomes, careful planning and purpose-driven programs are essential.

The impacts of tourism are often described in terms of three overlapping dimensions - Economic, Social/Cultural, and Environmental. The net outcomes of the positives and negatives of tourism along these three dimensions is called the “triple bottom line.” Sustainable tourism programs, then, are designed to improve the positive impacts and reduce the negative impacts, thereby improving the triple bottom line.

- **Collaboration.** Tourism development is undertaken in collaboration with key stakeholders – including the host community and the tourism industry. Many communities feel that tourism has happened *to* them, rather than *with* them, their voices having been part of decisions around the development or management of tourism in their destination. Sustainable tourism practitioners recognize that development without collaboration reduces the benefits of tourism in the long run.

### Destination stewardship

Stewardship is “*the responsible overseeing and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving*”<sup>1</sup>. Destination Stewardship expands on this definition and mirrors the definition of sustainable tourism. The World Travel and Tourism Council describes Destination Stewardship as “*an approach to destination governance that seeks to **balance the economic, environmental, and social/cultural needs of the destination; whilst operating within a legitimate governance model with active participation from public and private sectors, as well as the local community.***”<sup>2</sup>

### Destination assets

If destination stewardship is about caring for assets, it is worthwhile considering the assets being cared for. Every community has a set of shared or “common-pool” assets. These are sometimes called community capitals. Destination assets include:

#### Tangible Assets

- Environment
- Natural Spaces
- Built Environment

#### Intangible Assets

- Destination Brand
- Knowledge Capital
- Culture and Heritage
- Social Capital within tourism
- Goodwill toward tourism/Social license

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<sup>1</sup> *Stewardship*, in *Dictionary.com*. 2022, Dictionary.com.

<sup>2</sup> Imbsen, C., et al., *Towards Destination Stewardship: Achieving Destination Stewardship through scenarios and a Governance Diagnostic framework*, T. Misrahi, Editor. 2021, World Travel and Tourism Council: United Kingdom.

Neither MOT, nor the broader Maine tourism sector, own these resources. Even so, they are critical to the success of tourism in the destination.

Destination stewards must enrich and enhance these assets so they can be used to benefit the community today and in the future. That hasn't always happened, and tourism has been criticized as an extractive industry. With extractive industries, assets are used until they are gone. Mining is an example of an extractive industry. Once the ore has been taken from the ground, nothing is left. Many beautiful destinations have been exploited until they are no longer appealing. Everyone has a story about a place they went as a kid that has been "wrecked" by too many tourists. Similarly, unique cultural experiences in some destinations have been commodified to appeal to the broadest audience possible until they are no longer unique or authentic. Tourism doesn't have to lead to these outcomes. Careful destination stewardship ensures that the destination is appealing and generates social, environmental and economic benefits long into the future.

Tourism activities have the potential to enhance or diminish these assets. Strategic destination stewardship will work to enhance these assets. Creating and nurturing resources that ensure tourism success in the years to come.

### **Stakeholder management**

Stakeholder management has become one of the most important themes in business. Destination International's Destination Next studies have highlighted the importance of engaging with stakeholders in the destination community.

One of the key foundations of the definitions of both sustainable tourism and destination stewardship is developed in collaboration with a range of stakeholders. The notion that a developer, the government, or the DMO knows best and local communities or other stakeholders must comply with tourism development plans imposed upon them is giving way to decision-making that ensures a range of voices are heard and can influence the outcome.

Effective programs require monitoring the sentiment of a range of stakeholders. Three critical measures that should become important indicators of program success will be:

- Visitor satisfaction (and issue identification)
- Industry sentiment (and issue identification)
- Resident sentiment (and issue identification)

## Practical Tips for Destination Stewards: Enhancing Destination Assets

If destination stewardship is about ensuring that the common assets of a destination are protected and enriched, it is worthwhile considering the role of DMOs and the tourism industry in these tasks.

### Environment

Protecting the environment is one of the fundamental components of any sustainability program. Tourism industry stakeholders and visitors must be encouraged to reduce their energy use—particularly from non-renewable sources), protect and conserve water, and reduce waste.

Core elements of environmental programs include:

- **Energy:** Reducing the consumption of energy produced from non-renewables, such as coal or gas, is at the foundation of many environmental programs. This means conserving energy and encouraging energy production use via renewable means such as wind or solar.
- **Water:** In many communities, water is scarce and preservation of this resource is critical.
- **Waste:** Tourism generates waste. The 3 Rs— reducing, reusing, and recycling— have become commonplace activities in the U.S. Progressive destinations and businesses, including some hotel companies, have begun transitioning to “circular” production where waste is designed out to the product life cycle. Two of the most obvious waste challenges for our industry are:
  - Food waste, particularly at conferences and restaurants
  - Plastics, particularly the use of single-use items in hospitality settings

It is worthwhile noting that these three core environmental actions are at the heart of climate change mitigation efforts. Increasing the use of renewable energy, reducing energy consumption overall, and reducing waste are practical responses to reduce carbon emissions and address climate change.

How can DMOs support environmental programs?

- Encourage the adoption of comprehensive certification programs for destinations and businesses
- Ensure the MOT office is practicing pro-environmental behaviors
- Recognize industry champions taking the lead in environmental protection
- Identify challenges that resonate with the industry and promote best practices, e.g.:
  - Implement programs that address the use of single-use plastics
  - Promote recycling and/or circular economy activities
- Create and promote products that highlight renewable energy, e.g., trails for electric vehicles
- Integrate behavioral science/economics designed to encourage pro-environmental behaviors into placemaking projects when developing and implementing destination plans



## Natural Spaces and Biodiversity

Maine's natural spaces are one of the great attractions of the destination. Ensuring these natural spaces are protected today and for future generations is critical for the long-term benefit of tourism in the state.

How can DMOs support the protection of natural spaces?

- Ensure brand and marketing materials highlight respect and reverence for nature
- Incorporate natural space management in destination planning
- Partner with external organizations like Leave No Trace and Keep America Beautiful
- Identify specific issues of industry/visitor concern and develop marketing to address them

## Built Environment and Infrastructure

The built environment and infrastructure are vital components of the tourism system, allowing visitation, representing important attractions, and creating resilience in the face of climate change.

How can DMOs ensure the development of sustainable built environments and infrastructure?

- Ensure tourism is considered in town planning processes and other infrastructure projects
- Encourage building codes that reward maintaining unique architectural elements and neighborhood character
- Participate in climate change adaptation planning strategies

## Destination Brand

A strong destination image benefits not only the DMO but all the tourism organizations in the destination. DMOs provide leadership in developing branding for the destination. Destination branding can encourage sustainable activities by both the industry and visitors. Maine's branding already leverages many of the destination assets, including the natural environment and the destination's unique culture.

While there may have been a time when brands were built on advertising and promotional campaigns, it is clear that the strongest brands are now based on user experience. Destination branding relies more on user experience in the destination than marketing campaigns, which is why DMOs must realign their activities to balance destination development with marketing communications.

How can DMOs use build brand and support sustainability?

- Actively communicate the brand and its rationale, including the centrality of sustainability, to industry and other stakeholders
- Highlight the natural environment of the destination and encourage reverence and appreciation for it

- Promote the unique culture of the destination and create and nurture unique experiences that showcase it
- Develop plans to encourage utilization of the brand by stakeholders
- Set expectations for tourism products suitable to meet brand requirements

## People Capital

The saying goes, “Our greatest asset is our people,” and that is certainly true for destinations. The welcome of the people and the stories they tell create lasting messages. It is important for DMOs to recognize the contribution people make to the visitor experience.

Ensuring that all people have an opportunity to contribute to the destination is an important part of stewarding this asset. Diversity, equity, and inclusion not only strengthen the destination community but also increase its appeal to a broader range of visitors.

People capital, knowledge capital, and social license, which we’ll discuss next, are all elements of the destination that enable tourism to achieve its best possible outcomes.

How can DMOs nurture people capital?

- Foster a spirit of hospitality in destination communities
- Embed collaboration in all aspects of tourism planning and programming
- Ensure MOT adopts DEI best practices in its operations and marketing
- Celebrate the characters that represent the diverse experiences of Maine
- Encourage the adoption of DEI programs and training across the destination

## Knowledge Capital

The tourism industry's knowledge, skills, and abilities are important assets for any destination. Building the “bench strength” of the destination improves competitiveness and sustainability. Ensuring tourism businesses have the knowledge necessary to compete effectively can be challenging, particularly given many are small to medium enterprises with managers strapped for time and resources.

How can DMOs build knowledge capital in the destination?

- Identify knowledge gaps and develop strategies to meet the needs
- Disseminate research widely and in ways that busy industry members easily consume
- Conduct training on specific skills, including topics like:
  - Effective social media marketing
  - Implementing environmental programs
  - Experience/product development
- Encourage skill building on process related activities including:
  - Project management
  - Effective collaborations

## **Social License and Goodwill Toward Tourism (and DMOs)**

Tourism takes place with the implicit acceptance of the community. The concept of “social license” is the community’s acceptance of tourism growth in their destination. The social license is based on the understanding that the costs of additional visitors in the community—social, environmental, and economic—will be outweighed by the benefits the visitors bring.

One challenge for tourism in maintaining the social contract is that while many of the benefits of tourism are not obvious or are taken for granted, the negatives are clearly apparent.

In some ways, lack of awareness of the benefits of tourism is not surprising. Many DMOs are charged with promoting to target markets outside the destination, and too few invest in nurturing their relationship with internal stakeholders.

## **Culture and Heritage Assets**

Heritage and culture are often key attractions of destinations. In some cases, the relationship between the visitor economy and key cultural assets is obvious. Visitors support the cultural life of many destinations. Broadway would exist without visitors. Visitors support festivals, local restaurants, arts and crafts stores, and various businesses that contribute to the destination's culture. Many rural communities rely on visitors to support local development. Tourism can support heritage in more indirect ways too. For example, local farmers can maintain their lifestyle by supplying farmers markets or farm-to-table restaurants.

Culture is dynamic, with traditional activities and new experiences adding to the tapestry of cultural life. Destinations may leverage those things they are well known for while also embracing new cultural experiences that renew interest and appeal for the destinations.

How can DMOs nurture cultural and heritage assets?

- Engaging with arts and cultural organizations to promote destination-based experiences
- Ensuring heritage locations are effectively protected from tourists and visitors by engaging in visitor management at heritage locations
- Acknowledging the unique value of local culture and protecting residents
- Create unique products and experiences that feature local heritage and culture
- Promote local heritage and culture through brand-related marketing

## The Business Case for Sustainability

When implementing sustainable tourism programs, it is important to remember that there is a strong business case for adopting sustainability-related activities.

- Consumer demand: Consumers expect destinations to be protecting their environment and cultural heritage
- Consumer experience: Sustainable practices ensure positive consumer experiences today and in the future
- Social license: Sustainable tourism ensures that key stakeholders, including residents, continue to see the value of tourism
- Reputation and brand
- Competitiveness: Sustainability-related activities improve visitor experience quality and differentiate the destination, creating a competitive advantage
- Risk mitigation and resilience

Encouraging the industry to adopt sustainability isn't asking them for a favor; it is helping them create stronger businesses today and for the future.

## The Way Tourism is Done

Destinations that embrace sustainability are not alone. Sustainability is one of the most important trends in the tourism industry. Destinations around the world are embracing sustainable tourism.

Major sectors of the industry have already embraced sustainability practices and are encouraging their members and suppliers to do the same. For example:

- Tour operators' associations: USTOA<sup>3</sup>
- Business travel<sup>4</sup>
- Aviation<sup>5</sup>

The largest companies in the industry are addressing sustainability issues. Major hotels are providing detailed reporting on their sustainability activities.

**CSR and ESG:** Companies have often described their sustainability-related actions as Corporate Social Responsibility. These are the environmentally and socially responsible activities that companies undertake that are above and beyond their legal requirements. Recently, reporting on these activities may be included in ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) reporting. While CSR often frames these activities in terms of social citizenship, ESG reporting recognizes that not addressing these issues represents a risk to business and focuses on actions that mitigate that risk.

<sup>3</sup> <https://ustoa.com/sustainablesuzie>

<sup>4</sup> <https://gtafoundation.org/sustainability/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iata.org/en/programs/environment/>

Beyond lodging, many of the largest intermediaries in the tourism system are engaging in sustainability activities.

- Booking.com<sup>6</sup>
- Expedia's Impact and Sustainability<sup>7</sup>
- American Express Business Travel ESG Reporting<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.sustainability.booking.com/?aid=318615;label=New\\_English\\_EN\\_CAUS\\_5496343225-yalim2Lj5r3PNR2Ve93JJwS640819003398;pl:ta:p1:p2:ac:ap:neg:fi:tidsa-55482331735:lp9016722:li:dec:dm:ag5496343225:cmp108539785;ws=&gclid=Cj0KCQiA14WdBhD8ARIsANao07jy-M3lp2gh9QBKliin0lmwDb2ienKcWVHGpmuCYfULzoViCdyVy1caAnwJEALw\\_wcB](https://www.sustainability.booking.com/?aid=318615;label=New_English_EN_CAUS_5496343225-yalim2Lj5r3PNR2Ve93JJwS640819003398;pl:ta:p1:p2:ac:ap:neg:fi:tidsa-55482331735:lp9016722:li:dec:dm:ag5496343225:cmp108539785;ws=&gclid=Cj0KCQiA14WdBhD8ARIsANao07jy-M3lp2gh9QBKliin0lmwDb2ienKcWVHGpmuCYfULzoViCdyVy1caAnwJEALw_wcB)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.expediagroup.com/who-we-are/Impact--Sustainability/default.aspx#module-tabs\\_item--first](https://www.expediagroup.com/who-we-are/Impact--Sustainability/default.aspx#module-tabs_item--first)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.amexglobalbusinesstravel.com/corporate-social-responsibility/>



## Getting It Done: Implementing Sustainable Tourism Practices in Maine

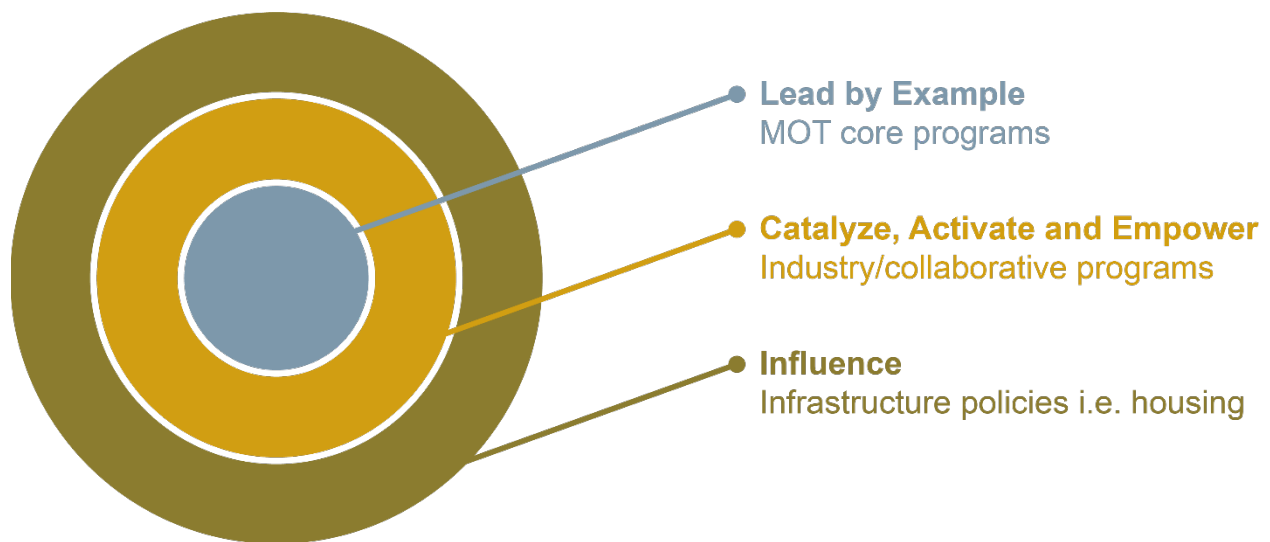
MOT is the champion for tourism in Maine. The work of MOT is to ensure that the people of Maine receive the greatest benefits from tourism and experience the fewest negative impacts. As such, MOT must take the lead in ensuring that Maine tourism adopts sustainable tourism practices. Encouraging the industry to evolve and grow in new ways is a strategic activity. It takes time and effort over the long term, but it's a great time in history to take up the challenge.

### The Changing Roles of DMOs

In recent years, DMOs have come to realize that to effectively support tourism growth, they need to be involved in issues of destination development, as well as marketing communications. The idea that DMOs should be considered DMMOs has gained popularity. Nevertheless, the term “managing” implies a level of control over processes that DMOs don't have. While a DMO can manage a promotional or branding campaign, destination development requires working with a range of stakeholders.

### MOT roles

Implementing sustainable tourism requires changing priorities and adopting new approaches to destination marketing and management. DMOs don't own the destination assets that attract visitors to the destination. Through promotion and destination development, they can support sustainable community development through tourism.



Destination Stewardship is a team activity. The success of the destination is the result of the work of the entire tourism industry and other stakeholders.

MOT has several critical roles in ensuring the best outcomes for Maine. It can lead by example, it can catalyze, activate, and empower tourism industry partners, and it can influence decisions that impact tourism's long-term success.

### **1. Lead by example**

To show genuine commitment to sustainability, MOT must ensure that their core activities incorporate principles of sustainability. This begins with the operations of the office itself and the programs over which it has the greatest control.

### **2. Catalyze, activate, and empower:**

MOT provides important leadership in the Maine tourism industry. Its ability to convene the industry to address industry issues extends its reach beyond the limits of its own resources. While collaborative activities typically require relinquishing some control over outcomes, they attract additional resources and enhance commitment. Creating platforms and frameworks enables effective partnerships. Embedding collaboration into MOT's business practices is an essential component of building a solid and sustainable destination.

Many of MOT's programs are designed to engage with the tourism industry. Cooperative marketing activities and regional destination development provide a solid foundation for enhancing collaborative programs.

Cooperative marketing and grant programs should incorporate incentives for adopting sustainability practices. For instance, development grants could require sustainability plans to be outlined in submissions along with other criteria. Preferential treatment in cooperative marketing for products and businesses adopting sustainability practices is another lever to encourage the adoption of sustainability behaviors.

Recognizing leaders, early adopters of sustainability practices, and exemplars of best practices is a great way to empower the industry. Providing awards for local suppliers (locally produced souvenirs, crafts, or food), environmental or climate champions, or businesses celebrating local culture can be a way to encourage attention to these issues.

Ensuring that tourism management and employees are well-informed is critical to ensuring a solid industry. DMOs, particularly STOs, often have access to knowledge resources—research, trends, and other data—not available to small businesses. Distributing knowledge and insights through the industry is an important task. Information should be shared widely and in ways that can be applied.

Finally, as noted earlier, the knowledge capital of the tourism industry in Maine is an important asset. Ensuring the industry is well-trained and up to date with the critical skills necessary to be sustainable and competitive is vital for any DMO.

### **3. Influence**

Ironically, some of the most critical factors in successful, sustainable tourism destinations are determined by organizations that don't consider themselves part of the industry. Tourism depends on infrastructure investments, government services, policies, and legislation.

MOT and the Maine tourism industry must engage with a range of decision-makers to ensure the most sustainable outcomes for tourism. Tourism is sometimes described as an “all of government” industry. From roads, airports, and parks to energy production, policing, and security, successful tourism relies on a range of services provided by government and semi-government organizations. As a major stakeholder in these services, tourism should have a seat at the table.

In addition to resources, successful sustainable tourism relies on a framework of policies, laws, and regulations. MOT and the Maine tourism industry must ensure its needs are heard through the legislative process.

### **Walk the talk**

Stimulating change in the Maine tourism system will require MOT to lead by example and they should be sure they are walking the talk.

How can MOT lead by example?

- Ensure MOT office administration and operation adopt climate-friendly practices
- Ensure staff are trained in DEI
- Source operational products locally, e.g., promotional giveaways

### **Use the power of marketing to support sustainable development through tourism**

If sustainability is one of the most misunderstood terms, “marketing” is not far behind. Too often, folks equate marketing to advertising or public relations, but it is much more. The American Marketing Association describes marketing as “processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”<sup>9</sup>. Destination marketers have a large toolbox of marketing activities they can employ to create value for their stakeholders. Destination development, product and destination development, and travel trade development are all essential tools for destination marketers.

Remembering that destination development is a critical *marketing* activity is essential as the DMO focuses on sustainability issues. Destination development is integral to delivering an appealing destination experience to visitors. As mentioned, user experience determines a brand more than marketing communications.

MOT has a strong history of outstanding destination marketing, and many of those activities already incorporate principles of sustainable tourism. As MOT incorporates sustainability into its DNA, there is an opportunity to modify and enhance existing programs while introducing new programs to support destination stewardship.

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<sup>9</sup> AMA. *Definitions of Marketing*. 2017 [cited 2022; Available from: <https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>].

## **Synergize MOT core programs**

With limited resources, MOT must ensure that its activities are synergized. That means integrating and aligning a wide range of marketing activities to achieve sustainable development goals. This could be thought of as a focused form of integrated marketing. Integrated sustainable tourism marketing ensures that all aspects of the marketing plans support the sustainability goals.

## **Leverage the power of frameworks and platforms**

One way to leverage the knowledge and skills of MOT is to create platforms that enable destinations to align with MOT programs. Frameworks and guidelines allow destinations and tourism businesses to customize their marketing activities to meet local needs while contributing to larger state-level goals.

Programs that leverage frameworks include:

- Experience program
- Brand activation programs
- Regional destination planning

## **Incorporate sustainability into the brand**

Incorporating sustainability into the brand is an effective means of promoting sustainable behaviors from various stakeholders.

This doesn't mean you must incorporate "Green" or "sustainability" in your slogan or logo. Developing branding that includes activities and experiences that lead to sustainable outcomes and reinforce sustainability efforts. Consider brand elements that do the following:

- Highlight natural spaces and experiences
- Promote local cultural experiences
- Highlight local businesses and ways to spend money in destination communities

Several destinations have created brand extensions directed at stakeholders, including the local travel trade, highlighting destination sustainability.

## **Empower local solutions to tourism development**

In many ways, tourism at the state level can be considered as a portfolio of destinations. Each diverse destination in the portfolio has unique opportunities and challenges while also sharing characteristics common to other destinations in the state. These destinations benefit from state-level destination branding and local customized destination planning.

Developing plans that recognize local goals and address community issues and concerns is more likely to be appreciated and implemented than generalized plans. Creating frameworks that address broader statewide goals and objectives but accommodate local issues can deliver the best of top-down and bottom-up planning. Some examples of that at work are:

- Hawaii Destination Marketing Action Plans<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hawaiiitourismauthority.org/what-we-do/destination-management/>

- Queensland<sup>11</sup>
- Oregon<sup>12</sup>

## Allocate resources to achieve these goals

While marketing communications are essential in building sustainable destinations, destination development activities are also mission-critical. These activities, many of which will be developed in collaboration with other entities, require resources and investments in time and energy.

## Build in new perspectives

The commitment to collaboration will mean creating new processes to gather advice and nurture new partnerships for collective action.

The development of destination stewardship councils designed to help guide the sustainability journey is strongly encouraged. There are a variety of ways that these councils can be organized, but there is value in considering ensuring that voices are included from the following categories:

- Members of the community
- NGOs and associations
- Tourism businesses and organizations
- Government departments

## Encourage sustainable tourism system development

Destination stewardship is a team effort and MOT has a vital role in empowering the team to contribute to the destination's goals.

Destinations become more sustainable as the organizations engaged in tourism adopt sustainable tourism practices. A crucial role of destination stewards is to encourage the adoption of sustainability practices in each destination.

There is a range of approaches to this task, for example:

- Highlighting existing programs initiated by other organizations
- Identifying programs of particular importance in the destination based on perceived needs or local concerns, e.g.:
  - Food waste
  - Plastics
  - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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<sup>11</sup> <https://teq.queensland.com/au/en/industry/who-we-are/strategic-plans?redirect=about-teq-new/plans-and-strategies/destination-tourism-plans>

<sup>12</sup> <https://industry.traveloregon.com/regions/>



- Accessibility (Queensland, Australia<sup>13</sup> declared 2023 the year of accessible tourism, for example)
- Comprehensive programs that incorporate certifications (Slovenia<sup>14</sup> is an excellent example of this approach)

## Target the “right” markets

Targeting visitors that align with the destination's goals is an important first step in all aspects of destination marketing, from destination development to branding. It is important to remember that embedding sustainability in destination marketing is not the same as targeting a specific niche, and this approach is not about targeting a “green” consumer.

In targeting visitors, Maine must reconcile the type of visitor that can contribute to improving the quality of life in the destination. With that in mind, target markets should:

- Align with values – appreciate the environment and respect the culture of the destination
- Maximize the economic benefit to the destinations they visit

Some destinations are starting to consider beyond economics in targeting consumers. For example, Holland is considering the carbon footprint of travelers when making targeting choices<sup>15</sup>. Travelers that come by car generate fewer carbon emissions than those that fly.

## Promote benefits, not attributes

As with any destination marketing activity, it is essential to focus on the consumer benefits of destinations and products. Sustainable practices can enhance the visitor's experience. For example, consumers are seeking unique and authentic experiences, and these products are often provided by local suppliers and celebrate local culture.

Incorporating basic environmental practices can reinforce sustainability messages and reassure consumers that their travels are not doing harm.

## Visitor management

There was a time when the role of DMOs was to attract visitors – the more, the better. The general assumption was that the tourism industry and host communities would care for the visitors. As tourism has increased, it has become clear that ensuring visitors have a positive experience when visiting in order to generate the benefit sought by the community requires careful programming.

Managing visitors in the destination is an essential element of sustainable tourism. While visitors are critical to the success of the destination, ensuring that they contribute in the most effective ways is vital. Several issues can be addressed by effective destination.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://teq.queensland.com/au/en/industry/what-we-do/cruise\\_indigenous\\_nature\\_tourism/accessible-tourism](https://teq.queensland.com/au/en/industry/what-we-do/cruise_indigenous_nature_tourism/accessible-tourism)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.slovenia.info/en/business/green-scheme-of-slovenian-tourism>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nbtc.nl/en/site/knowledge-base/the-road-to-climate-neutral-tourism.htm>

- **Seasonality** is often identified as one of the challenges of sustainable tourism. Seasonality has a set of negative impacts. At a destination level, assets should be utilized more productively. From a business point of view, trained workers can be lost, and business during the offseason is reduced. For workers seeking a career in hospitality – opportunities may be lost at the end of the season.

Many destinations have developed strategies to overcome seasonality issues.

- **Dispersal of visitors**, or how tourism is spread out across the state, is another challenge. Strategies that recognize that the state is comprised of a portfolio of destinations, each sharing common traits of Maine but each with unique attractions and appeals, can be helpful.

Several approaches can be used to support growth across the destination portfolio, such as:

- Encouraging current visitors to return more frequently and visit “new” locations
  - Encouraging new markets to visit new destinations in the state and using niche marketing to attract visitors to those destinations
- **Combatting Overtourism** is a challenge for some locations. In recent years there has been considerable attention to managing visitors in popular areas. Fortunately, there is a range of strategies destinations can utilize to address these issues.

Once again, these issues must be addressed in collaboration with the community. Each destination will have its own concerns and responses. Some destinations may be concerned with seasonality due to the economic opportunity costs, while others value downtime for lifestyle issues.

## Enroll visitors to travel responsibly in Maine

Research shows visitors support sustainability programs and want to protect the destinations they visit. While they are ready to do the right thing, they seek guidance. Many destinations are providing visitors with advice on how to travel in the most responsible ways. Responsible traveler programs should be extended to incorporate unique elements of the Maine tourism experience, including details on landowner rights and responsibilities.

Examples of programs encouraging visitors to travel responsibly include:

- Monterey California<sup>16</sup>
- Indiana Dunes<sup>17</sup>
- Wyoming<sup>18</sup>

Some destinations partner with specialist organizations to highlight best behaviors in specific circumstances, for example:

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.seemonterey.com/sustainable/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.indianadunes.com/explore-the-dunes/visit-with-care/love-and-protect/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://travelwyoming.com/wy-responsibly/>

- Leave No Trace<sup>19</sup>, which partners with several destinations such as Arizona, North Carolina, and Colorado
- Travelcarecode<sup>20</sup>, which works with destinations to encourage responsible travel behaviors

There are many organizations that support sustainability practices in tourism. See the resources section for a partial list.

## Communicate your sustainability journey

To use the old cliché, sustainability is a journey, not a destination. In the case of sustainable destinations, this means there will always be more to do. Working toward sustainability means tackling a whole portfolio of activities, not just a single task. Managing expectations and effectively communicating your steps are essential elements of a successful program.

Communicating sustainability efforts can be challenging, and organizations must be thoughtful in their approach. Avoiding accusations of **greenwashing**—when organizations falsely report sustainable tourism progress—while at the same time, not **green hushing**—not talking about or downplaying sustainability progress—can be difficult. There will always be individuals that think you are doing too much and others who want you to do more.

In developing communication strategies, consider the following:

- Don't oversell the program. This is MOT's and the Maine tourism industry's response to sustainability issues. It won't solve all the problems tomorrow, but there is a commitment to meet the challenges constructively.
- Be realistic and avoid toxic optimism. There is a tendency for DMO managers to only talk about the good things in the destination. Stakeholders—consumers, tourism-reliant businesses, and residents—experience both the positives and negatives of visitation. Failing to address the challenges undermines trust. Acknowledge the challenges and look for shared solutions to overcome them.
- Acknowledge your role, including its limitations. MOT is one (important) player in this process. No one can solve these problems alone, but they can lead by example, empower, catalyze and collaborate to find solutions, and influence decisions that contribute to tourism sustainability.
- Highlight progress in terms of benefits to stakeholders. Reporting actions is helpful, and highlighting outcomes and impacts is critical.
- Measure your performance and be transparent in the progress.

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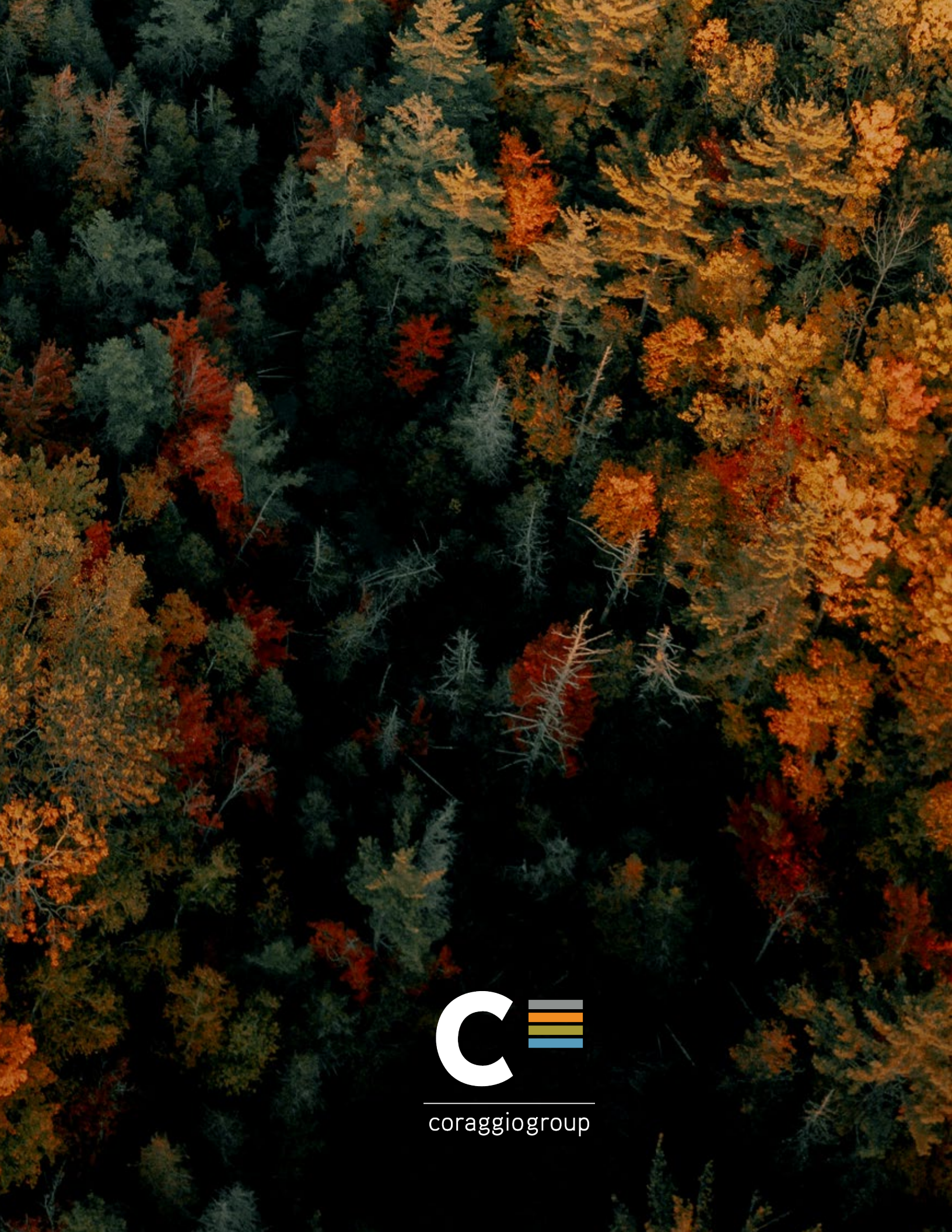
<sup>19</sup> <https://Int.org/partnership/tourism/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.travelcarecode.org/>

## Final Thoughts

The tourism industry is maturing, and expectations of the contribution of tourism to destinations are evolving. Communities expect tourism to contribute positively to their destination. The Tourism industry must contribute to sustainable development, improving economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects of quality of life, or risk losing community and stakeholder support. Destination stewardship is not optional. The work begun with the plan accompanying this guidebook is critical. The Maine Office of Tourism is taking a proactive approach to ensuring that the tourism industry in Maine remains vibrant today and into the future.





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