

**ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES (ACS)
DIRECTORATE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

ESTABLISHING THE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ZONE OF THE CARIBBEAN

Project Brief

INTRODUCTION

Tourism constitutes the main economic activity for most countries of the region referred to as the Greater Caribbean, and is a significant contributor to economic and social development. Persistent turbulence in other economic sectors in the region has served to enhance the relative importance of tourism as an economic development strategy. Tourism is therefore increasingly crucial for the economic survival of local economies, both as a means of employment and as a source for foreign direct investment and foreign exchange earnings.

According to the World Tourism Organisation, sustainable tourism is an approach to tourism development that seeks to “meet the needs of present tourist and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future”. It involves the management of all resources, natural, cultural, human and financial in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while providing a unique experience to the visitor and at the same time, improving the quality of life for the locals.

An important component of the sustainable tourism equation is to ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities that would ultimately contribute to poverty alleviation. This represents a real challenge in that tourism planners, national authorities, private entrepreneurs and the civil society have to find adequate mechanisms to ensure that tourism development is coordinated and beneficial to all stakeholders.

THE PROCESS TO ESTABLISH THE GREATER CARIBBEAN AS A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ZONE

Aware of the importance of the tourism industry for the region and recognising the need to ensure that the natural, cultural, social and financial resources needed for its development were managed in a sustainable way, the regional Heads of State and/or Governments of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) signed the Convention Establishing the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Caribbean (STZC) in 2001. By receipt of Diplomatic Note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Colombia, in the capacity as the Depository State of the Association's Ratification Instruments, the ACS was officially notified that the Margarita Convention which establishes the STZC, gaining sufficient signatories from the ACS' Member and Associate Member States had been ratified, and entered into force on **November 6th, 2013**, effectively establishing the Greater Caribbean Region as the First Sustainable Tourism Zone in the World!

The STZC has been identified “as a geographically determined cultural, socio-economic and biologically rich and diverse unit, in which tourism development will depend on sustainability and the principles of integration, co-operation and consensus, aimed at facilitating the integrated development of the Greater Caribbean”.

STZC Regional Sustainable Tourism Indicators

In recognition of the different conditions of the tourism destinations in the Greater Caribbean as one of the main challenges to establish the Zone, an additional instrument was created as part of the Convention which includes a set of indicators to harmonise the criteria for the inclusion of destinations in the STZC. From 2001, the ACS worked on developing this system of indicators for destination evaluation, in collaboration with the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). These were validated at a Regional Workshop held in Trinidad and Tobago in 2004 and later adopted as the STZC Regional Sustainable Tourism Indicators which have been approved by the ACS countries as guidelines to evaluate the sustainability of their tourism destinations. The indicators consist of a number of main sustainability themes, a range of baseline standards and optional targets for Environmental, Cultural, Social and Economic criteria.

Subsequently, the implementation of the Regional Sustainable Tourism Indicators through a series of destination evaluation exercises was initiated. The **First or Pilot Phase** began with the project ‘Development and Implementation of Sustainability Indicators in the Greater Caribbean’, which was conducted from January to June 2006 with funds provided by the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the Government of the United Kingdom. During this Pilot Phase, five destinations in five ACS countries were visited by a group of consultants and evaluated in the context of the Sustainable Tourism Indicators: the City of Roseau in Dominica, Bayahibe in the Dominican Republic, Ocho Rios Resort Area in Jamaica, Cozumel in Mexico and Portobelo in Panama. The field exercises were followed by an intensive workshop held in Bayahibe, Dominican Republic on Selecting and Evaluating Tourism Destination for the STZC. This workshop was also convened as the 7th Meeting of the Group of Experts on Sustainable Tourism Indicators (STIE-7) of the ACS Special Committee on Sustainable Tourism (SCST).

The evaluation of this first group of destinations facilitated the development of guidelines for ACS member countries to select destinations to become part of the STZC, as well as the formulation of the STZC Destination Evaluation Form. Additionally, the Project included gap analysis and the preparation of action plans for the pilot destinations in accordance to the set of Sustainable Tourism Indicators of the Convention Establishing the Zone.

The Second Phase or ‘Project for the Expansion of the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean (STZC)’ was conducted from April to November 2008 and funded by the INTERREG IIIB *Espace Caraïbe* Programme, under the auspices of the Regional Council of Guadeloupe. This second phase included the evaluation of seven additional destinations in five ACS countries, namely Verte Vallé and Saint François-Pointe de Châteaux in Guadeloupe; the Community of Saint Anne and the Caravelle Peninsula in Martinique; Awala Yalimapo in French Guyana; Buccoo Reef in Trinidad and Tobago; and the Richmond Site in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Following the evaluations, a Closing Forum held in Guadeloupe was convened as the 8th Meeting of the Group of Experts on Sustainable Tourism Indicators (STIE-8) and a concept for an Internet site dedicated to the STZC was proposed.

Pursuant to the completion of the first and second phases the following tools have been developed and tested:

- Guidelines for the Selection of Applicant Destinations
- Destination Profile Form Template
- Destination Evaluation Form
- Indicative Guide to Destination Evaluation Form
- List of Suggested Sectors Stakeholders for attending STZC Applicant Destination Workshops

The **Third Phase** which is currently ongoing is funded by the INTERREG IV *Espace Caraïbe* Programme, in collaboration with the Regional Council of Martinique. This project, '*Establishment of the Regional Cooperation Mechanism of the STZC*' has been designed to strengthen and operationalize the STZC and includes the following:

- a. A Study that collates best practices on Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Destination Management being implemented at the national, regional and international levels, to identify commonalities and define the way forward in the establishment of the STZC.
- b. Development of the STZC Website (Internet based management information tool) which will host general information on the STZC and its destination management tools and resources and also showcase destination profiles.
- c. Development of promotional materials to include a logo/insignia to brand STZC destinations and the updating and publication of brochures, guidebooks and other literature.
- d. Continuation of the regional selection and evaluation process of destinations to become part of the STZC, to have at least one destination in each ACS Member and Associate Member State STZC designated.
- e. The establishment of support mechanisms and formalisation of regional and international linkages will also be prioritised to enhance the profile, visibility and value of the STZC.

THE NEXT STEPS

In the current context of expanding tourism, it is recognised that many ACS Member countries, most of which are Small Island Developing States (SIDS), find it increasingly challenging to compete effectively in order to grow and maintain their share of the Global Tourism market, without impairing cultural roots and richness and/or damaging sensitive biophysical environments. The STZC was conceived to deal with the three major challenges affecting tourism in the Greater Caribbean Region, which are: the premature ageing of tourist destinations and subsequent rapid devaluation, changes in consumer preference for the tourism product, and the major factors affecting the environment on land and in the sea.

The STZC is a viable response to these challenges, and aims inter-alia to facilitate the sustainable management of tourism at the destination and community levels, in order to improve local governance and contribute to natural resources management, biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation.

The ACS continues its efforts to advance the ambitious project to create a network of Greater Caribbean tourism destinations that are working towards their ecological, economical, and socio-cultural sustainability through the implementation of the sustainable tourism indicators identified at the regional level under the **Convention Establishing the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Caribbean and its Protocol**. The objective in this regard is to build a unified and comprehensive approach to destination sustainability in the Region.

Future projects related to the STZC are firstly to hold national and regional capacity building exercises on Destination Evaluation and Management to facilitate communication and exchanges among STZC destination stakeholders and promote the use of indicators and related tools; and secondly complete the regional selection and evaluation of destinations through the conduct of Destination Evaluation Exercises. The updating and subsequent application of the same evaluation methodology and instruments for destinations to become part of the STZC would be crucial to guarantee the homogeneousness of the information provided by each destination, ensure alignment with current sustainability practises and standards, and also maintain comparable quality standards.

The STZC initiative being championed by the ACS is a proactive and innovative initiative that bridges the gap between tourism and sustainability by incorporating the principles of sustainable development in integrated tourism planning. This initiative, in seeking to harmonise the understanding and practise of sustainability and destination stewardship offers a unique tool to co-ordinate regional efforts in the area of tourism development. Additionally, there is an unparalleled opportunity to leverage marketing and promotion efforts, given the increasing popularity of sustainable tourism and the niche market industry which has evolved as travellers demand more environmentally sensitive and socially responsible vacation options.

The ACS therefore continues to pursue several channels for resource mobilisation through the international community of donors interested in the sustainable development of tourism in the Greater Caribbean. This is intended to support research and the development of projects so as to promote preservation, conservation and sustainable use and management of countries natural resources and natural spaces within the framework of the establishment of the 'Zone'.