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The Convention for the establishment of the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean (STZC), an initiative of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), has been ratified, gaining sufficient signatories from the ACS' Member and Associate Member States to be fully entered into force, effectively establishing the Caribbean Region as the First Sustainable Tourism Zone in the World!

From Conception to Implementation

The tourism industry has gained prominence as the most important economic activity in several ACS Member and Associate Member States of the Greater Caribbean, as persistent turbulence in other economic sectors has served to enhance the relative importance of tourism as an economic development strategy. Protecting and guaranteeing tourism as a long-term activity was the main consideration for establishing the STZC. The regional Heads of State and/or Governments of the ACS, 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, signed the Convention Establishing the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Caribbean in 2001.

The STZC has been defined in the Convention "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".

The STZC represents a unique approach to co-ordinate regional efforts in the area of tourism development. However, recognising the disparities among the regions' destinations as one of the main challenges to establish the Zone, a set of criteria which includes a comprehensive list of

indicators was developed as part of the Convention, to harmonise the standards and evaluation process for the inclusion of destinations in the 'Zone'.

This tool, the STZC Regional Sustainable Tourism Indicators are a set of benchmarks and guidelines for destination evaluation, which was developed by the ACS in collaboration with various Regional and International Organisations and United Nations (UN) Agencies. The Indicators system consists of a number of main sustainability themes, a range of basic indicators, specific measurements as well as regional standards and optional benchmarks.

Essentially the indicators are a tool that destination managers can use to evaluate the sustainability of their destination according to key environmental, social, cultural and economic criteria. Following the evaluation process, a Gap Analysis and Dynamic Action Plan is generated which outlines actions to increase the sustainability of the destination in order to meet the STZC baseline criteria and subsequently international standards and benchmarks. To date, twelve tourism destinations in ACS Member and Associate Member States have been evaluated.

Marketing and Management of the STZC

STZC Website

In setting an enabling environment for the promotion and further development of the STZC, a Regional Cooperation Mechanism is in the process of being established and will be hosted via the soon to be developed STZC website, which will also house the evaluation framework and tools.

The STZC Website is in its initial stage of development and is conceived as an information, marketing and resource tool to support the establishment and promotion of the STZC. Designed to function as a user-friendly and interactive platform, the website will facilitate the evaluation of additional destinations, host content related to the STZC initiative and serve as a platform for dialogue, interaction and engagement of the participating destinations, Regional Tourism Authorities and the public at large.

STZC Steering Committee (SSC)

With the objective to establish a sustainable mechanism that would allow for the support and co-ordination of the STZC network, a Steering Committee comprised of Academics, Sustainability experts and Tourism officials from ACS Member and Associate Member States has been conceived. The STZC Steering Committee will in its primary capacity oversee and verify the STZC destination selection and evaluation process, and support marketing and fundraising efforts.

Benefits for ACS Member countries

The establishment of the STZC is a proactive and innovative initiative by the ACS, incorporating the principles of sustainable development in integrated tourism planning. This initiative has the potential to further raise awareness in the international travel market of the commitment of the countries of the Greater Caribbean in adhering to the principles of sustainable and responsible Tourism development. The STZC thus offers an opportunity for the regions' destinations to grow their market share, access new markets, and expand their tourism product offerings. Some of the primary benefits to be gained in this regard are summarised below.

1.Market Access - At the destination level, countries can leverage the benefit of being part of a Region designated as the First Sustainable Tourism Zone in the world. On the geo-political level, this initiative will effectively position the Greater Caribbean as a leader in the competitive 'Carbon-Aware' market place.

2.Enhance Destination Sustainability - The Regional Sustainable Tourism Indicators developed as part of the STZC is expected to contribute to more efficient management of natural resources and assist with mitigation of the effects of climate change, which is especially important as many ACS Member Countries are small-island developing states, that are highly dependent on tourism and are, at the same time, significantly affected by risk factors as a result of climate change. In that context, participation in the STZC has the added potential to enhance resource mobilisation efforts for the development and implementation of sustainable tourism projects and strategies which can further aid in advancing the benefits of tourism to the countries of the Greater Caribbean.

3.Competitive advantage - One of the main challenges surrounding the issue of ‘sustainability’ is a lack of accountability by operators and indeed destinations which label and or market themselves under the sustainability brand, a practice sometimes referred to as "green washing." The approach therefore, for management of the STZC process is through a multi-stakeholder participative process, taking into consideration these sensitivities. The voluntary contribution of Regional experts and academics, who form part of the STZC Steering Committee, is expected to safeguard the credibility and validity of the instrument.

Looking towards the future

Future actives of the ACS will seek to institutionalise and subsequently strengthen the STZC. Prioritised will be completion of the regional selection and evaluation process of destinations to become part of the STZC; and secondly, conducting national and regional capacity building exercises on Destination Evaluation and Management.

The question of the long term sustainability of this initiative to have the Greater Caribbean identified and established as the First Sustainable Tourism Zone in the World also warrants introspection. In that regard, the STZC affords a kaleidoscope of languages, cuisine, religious and cultural events/expressions, as well as historical, archaeological and ecological sites, and would furthermore support the advancement of related ACS projects, such as efforts to promote multi-destination tourism and to increase intra-regional travel, initiatives which seek to increase travel and tourism to each individual destination.

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