

# Skift.

## Here's What Stepping Up on Climate Change Means for Global Tourism

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### Skift Take

**I**t's a historic moment for the industry, with climate now sitting at the top of the global tourism agenda, even if many more stakeholders are yet to join the party. But rallying behind the climate emergency might just be the thing that resolves tourism's many woes, everywhere.

— *Lebawit Lily Girma*

After years of collective silence and inertia from most businesses on climate action, the travel industry has reached a turning point. For the first time, more than 300 players in global tourism have agreed to stand behind a single roadmap addressing climate change.

By signing the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism, every signatory makes a public commitment to cut its emissions by 50 percent by 2030 and to reach net zero by 2050. An effort originally spearheaded by Tourism Declares A Climate Emergency, the declaration officially launched on Thursday at COP26.

The significance of this effort is also historic in that it will be collaboratively led by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), two of travel's leading bodies that had failed to align on key issues in recent years.

"We are launching this action and this declaration together and this is again a nice and good beginning of this long term and very important project," said Zurab Pololikashvili, secretary general of the UNWTO, at the launch event on Thursday.

The declaration's framework and language was also developed with input from a diverse range of groups in tourism and conservation, including the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Pacific Asia Travel Association, European Travel Commission, Caribbean Tourism Organization, South Pacific Tourism Organization, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Planeterra, Cuidadores de Destinos, Women in Travel, Sustentur, George Washington University and Travel Unity, among others.

“Two years ago, there was hardly any talk about climate action planning; we weren’t hearing much from the big players like UNWTO and WTTC, and now we’ve got a joined up framework aligning the sector around the common common target,” said Jeremy Sampson, CEO of The Travel Foundation, which is partnering with both international organizations to lead this effort. “We’ve got the expectation now that literally hundreds of organizations will be developing climate action plans, which is great.”

As of Thursday, among the signatories of the Glasgow Declaration are The Travel Corporation, G Adventures, Intrepid Travel, Iberostar Group, Accor, Skyscanner, Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, Scotland, Norway, Netherlands, Barbados, and Micronesia.

These more than 300 tourism businesses and organizations will be required to take the initial step of filing a climate action plan within 12 months, to report publicly on their progress and actions taken on an annual basis, and to share good practices and solutions to encourage more signatories to join and reach the industry’s target.

“What we tried to do here was simply align travel and tourism with the Paris Agreement and what science has told us, rather than trying to create something totally new and different,” said Sampson.

Climate action plans will have to focus first and foremost on the first target of cutting emissions in half by 2030 to be aligned, Sampson said.

Travel and tourism has a lot of catching up to do, and the latest data proves it. Out of 1,174 respondents, 28 percent of travel and tourism stakeholders say they have a climate action plan, while 73 percent are not measuring emissions at this time — this is according to early results shared exclusively with Skift from a current UNWTO-led survey mapping climate action across the travel industry. The full survey results will be available in December.

A handful of signatories who spoke with Skift seemed optimistic that the Glasgow Declaration is what the industry desperately needed to rally around the most critical threat to its future.

“This plan puts every player within our sector on equal footing; it allows for quicker understanding, directs them to resources, and hopefully, this will achieve faster action by all entities thanks to industry-specific templates and definition,” said Ewald Biemans, owner and CEO of Bucuti & Tara beach resort in Aruba, the Caribbean’s sole carbon-neutral hotel.

Judy Kepher-Gona, founder of Kenya-based Sustainable Travel & Tourism Agenda and board member at the Center for Responsible Travel, agreed that finding a common methodology that unifies all stakeholders is what makes this a big step forward.

“The way the declaration has even been drafted, it’s possible for nations to set their own targets,” said Kopher-Gona. “They can say, what are we going to do about measurement, about decarbonizing, about regeneration, how are we collaborating? Who will finance it? We can have it all laid out very nicely.”

In the most climate vulnerable parts of the world, such as island states in the Caribbean, climate adaptation discussions aren't new, but they've been largely limited to the environmental sector.

"It was not difficult for the leadership team to say yes we want to sign on to this; in the hope that we can really engage tourism stakeholders on a collective plan of action," said Maria Fowell, senior technical specialist in tourism at the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States. "Making that public declaration, that public commitment then allows us to open some doors to discussions on financing, climate funds and sustainable investments in tourism."

Signatories to the Glasgow Declaration also commit to collaborating and sharing information at a global level. Intrepid Travel is releasing a blueprint for all tour operators on Thursday to help simplify the process of what measuring action actually looks like, and a blueprint for hotels is currently being developed by Greenview and will become available soon.

As the climate chips away at global destinations — proving that wealthier corners like Germany and Lake Tahoe are no longer exempt from devastation — the question remains whether more of the northern hemisphere portion of the travel industry will join in the Declaration so tourism can finally close the gap between what it says and what it does before 2030 through this new sector-wide effort.

“We also need everyone else; there’s 2.5 million properties on Booking.com, so 392 isn’t even a drop in the ocean,” said Jeremy Smith, co-founder of Tourism Declares A Climate Emergency. “We need to spread it far and wide and to bring it in the mainstream.”

Predictably missing from this conversation are also the cruise sector and the aviation sector — the latter contributing between 50 to 70 percent of total tourism emissions and unlikely to go net zero by 2050. The Cruise Line Industry Association said it plans to share its sector’s updates on climate efforts on Friday.

That said, if this single framework and unified approach on creating a low-carbon future works at a global level, and is already convincing household names in travel to join that might not have otherwise, it could be the impetus that brings all parties to the table.

Might climate also be the metric that brings about the new model tourism desperately needs, one which, in the words of the Glasgow Declaration, will “move rapidly away from carbon- and material-intensive ways of delivering visitor experiences, instead prioritising community and ecosystem wellbeing”?

### **A Central Hub for Tourism Climate Action Data**

The Glasgow Declaration as well as all of the incoming data on climate action in tourism will live under the UNWTO’s One Planet Network and online platform, where the signatory database will live and be monitored for compliance.

The annual reporting requirement is expected to lead to significant data being collected through this platform. The reporting process is in the works and will be shaped in a participatory manner to ensure equity and inclusivity.

“We’ve never had that as a sector, we haven’t had sort of an aligned place to collect this data and have a clear understanding of how we’re doing as travel and tourism,” said The Travel Foundation’s Sampson, noting that this will allow for the mobilization of resources and driving support in the right direction and towards a greater sense of accountability.

While the UNWTO will monitor the platform, The Travel Foundation and Tourism Declares an Emergency will in turn take more responsibility for the community building and the capacity building side, pushing to reach out to and align with organizations and communities in tourism around the world so that the ripple effect reaches far and wide.

But who will hold signatories accountable and how does one enforce climate action across this complex, multilayered sector?

If action plans aren’t filed a year from now, businesses will be removed from signatory status, said Sampson.

“Ultimately, the businesses themselves and the destinations are going to have to hold themselves accountable — and so will travelers and so will investors, and so will employees, and so will decision makers,” said Sampson, adding that the key with this effort was to provide much more transparency, visibility, collaboration and information as well as a platform through which to try to achieve the goals.

### **Consumer Demand Is Here and Poised to Grow**

The data continues to show that travelers, particularly Millennials and Gen-Z, are increasingly seeking to experience nature and culture based activities, but they also are leaning towards supporting brands that are aligned with their values — those standing behind conservation, diversity, equity and inclusion.

Sixty-two percent of leisure travelers now say they actively seek out tour operators that adhere to responsible travel standards, while 63 percent want to support local communities, according to a new global study designed and led by [Twenty31](#), a tourism brand consultancy. The survey spanned over 11,000 online interviews of travelers around over the age of 18 in the U.S., UK, China, eastern and western European destinations, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

The interest to support local communities ranks even higher among American, Chinese, Saudi travelers, the poll showed, with levels exceeding 70 percent. Perhaps even more interesting is that the trend of seeking responsible travel offerings is now higher outside of the usual Western source markets. But when



it came to paying a premium for the experience, just 28 percent said they would be willing to pay 10 percent extra.

“Community first” when traveling also ranks among [Booking.com’s 2022 travel trends](#) survey, confirming this growing consumer interest in sustainable tourism. More than half of respondents agree that it’s important their trip benefits the destination’s local community.

Tourism businesses have begun to adjust their offerings to cater to this growing conscious consumer while some destinations such as Panama have redesigned their brand to center this future generation that cares about authenticity in tourism and not harming the planet.

“Carbon labels should be on everything that we buy, it should be the new calorie,” said Sam Bruce, co-founder of Much Better Adventures at World Travel Market on Monday, adding that there is now a carbon score on its excursions. “Customers are more attuned to this kind of thing and looking for it and expecting it.”

Corporate consumers are also increasingly asking more questions on carbon emissions and demanding to see a list from across tourism’s chain of what actions are being taken to reduce emissions but also to create positive impact, said co-panelist Claire Whitely, senior manager at Sustainability Hospitality Alliance.

## **Supply Chains Will Morph as Pressure Builds**

One of the main challenges facing tourism on this new climate action journey will be to figure out who's responsible for the emissions of a tourism businesses' supply chain, or "scope three emissions," such as employee business travel, asset leasing, and cruise or flight travel within trips. Some tourism businesses are already modifying their excursions to cut down on emissions.

But will businesses in the travel sector begin to demand that suppliers adhere to low carbon offerings and meet certain standards? It's likely more changes lie ahead as companies, particularly signatories to the Glasgow Declaration, rethink their modus operandi to meet targets and as competition builds. How quickly that happens in tourism-dependent regions where governments lack the political will to enforce or the private sector is focused on the bottom line will require additional mechanisms to be borne following the initial Glasgow Declaration push.

"The Caribbean tourism industry would benefit with one specific body across the region and supported by every country or territory's government throughout," said Bucuti & Tara resort's Biemans, adding that committing to carbon neutrality is key and communication must be made easier so that Caribbean stakeholders are not limited by location or membership.

Indeed, tourism's fragmentation along geopolitical lines can be an impediment to access and reaching those net zero goals.

"Openly share best practices, hold one another accountable, and require that all outside and international suppliers, vendors and operators are held to the same standard in caring for our fragile region as much as they care about the profits they generate from it," said Biemans.

Regional bodies could play a big role here. For example, the OECS signing the Declaration will allow it to undertake regional activities within the first year to push for the filing of action plans, Fowell said.

Moreover, tourism's close linkages with sectors that are not under its control will need to be addressed in different ways in different parts of the world.

"In as much as this is a tourism declaration, transport is not a function of the Ministry of Tourism in Kenya, for example," STTA's Kopher-Gona said. "So this must be disseminated by every destination at the inter ministerial level, because tourism depends so much on what is done by other ministries. Without those discussions, tourism might not be able to deliver on some of these targets for decarbonizing."

And does this new push mean governments that are signatories will lean towards rejecting hotel investments that aren't green, many of which are already in the pipeline?

"I think it's difficult to say never, but certainly it is working towards that and there is a commitment," said the OECS' Fowell, speaking on the Caribbean region.

### **A Chance to Do Away With Outdated Metrics**

Kopher-Gona said that for climate goals to be achieved, influential tourism bodies such as the WTTC and UNWTO must start changing the way they measure tourism success for their members and how members themselves measure success.

"If today WTTC told its members that for us, in the next coming years until 2050, our measure of competitiveness will be by members who have made the declaration, who have clear decarbonisation programs, and we will not measure you by the number of new investments that you have made in different countries — these private sector checks that are very, very important, only then will the government play its part."

Whether international organizations step up on reinventing tourism's traditional metrics of success or not, regulation is on the horizon.

"Investors are requiring increasingly sustainable returns, and then on the other hand regulation around decarbonisation is coming," said The Travel Foundation's Sampson. "Right now it's still quite voluntary, but we're going to get to the point where if the situation becomes more dire, where things are going to get less voluntary, so better to adapt now."

## **Could Climate Action Be What Fixes Tourism's Woes?**

In many ways, the injustice of whom climate has impacted the most mirrors the disparity of whom tourism has benefited the most.

This rallying around climate action across borders and across segments of the industry is the kind of cohesion tourism has struggled to achieve — a sector that the pandemic reminded all remains politicized and is increasingly blamed for putting up walls between the haves and the have nots, and for not managing to tackle many of the inequity issues in low to middle income countries, despite the decades of record profits for governments and multinationals.

Placing climate at the forefront of the discussion and creating this fresh wave of unity industry wide could be what allows the tourism industry to tackle all the issues it hasn't managed to confront or resolve despite claims of "building back better."

"I'm so keen on the method of how this works," said Kopher-Gona. "Because if we did the right method, and practice with climate action, then that method can be modified or can be replicated for all the other issues that we have in tourism, including issues of overtourism, including issues of equity in sharing of tourism value and tourism benefits. If the industry cracks this, there'll be nothing that won't be possible for the industry."

Indeed, climate might just be the metric of all metrics, the one that is inevitably highlights and unearths the need for sustainability, DEI, regeneration, and even addresses the recent mass tourism workforce exodus in some destinations. It could be what will push the sector to do much more than reduce its negative impact on the environment and host communities.

"This declaration is also recognizing certain things that are sensible to do sustainable tourism development; things like community, the recognition of the social community, ethnic communities, not just the natural environment," said STTA Kenya's Kopher-Gona. "It's not all lumped together."

One could even say that through the Glasgow Declaration, over 300 industry players big and small have just spoken collectively on the transformed tourism model they plan to work on post-pandemic. Will more join in?

"It's not only a conversation about decarbonization," said Sampson. "I think it's a conversation about, how does our sector continue to evolve and thrive and deliver the positive benefits that we want it to and that we believe that it can? We can't build it back the way that it was. It has to go forward."