

Message from Zurab Pololikashvili

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Rebuilding a sustainable and resilient tourism sector

Tourism is one of the economic sectors most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, international tourist arrivals dropped by 72% amid widespread travel restrictions, bringing the sector back to the level of 30 years ago.

As highlighted by the UN Secretary-General in his Policy Brief COVID-19 and Transforming Tourism¹, the pandemic not only had a direct impact on tourism, but also had many spillover effects on livelihoods, public services, and opportunities across all continents. This crisis is an opportunity to rethink the tourism sector and its contribution to the people and planet; it is an opportunity to build back better towards a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism sector that ensure the benefits of tourism are enjoyed widely and fairly.

As outlined in the One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery of Tourism from COVID-19² which was released by UNWTO in June 2020 and subsequently reaffirmed in the UNWTO Recommendations for the Transition to a Green Travel and Tourism Economy³, developed in 2021 in partnership with the G20 Tourism Working Group, recovering from the pandemic must also tackle underlying sustainability challenges, such as unsustainable consumption and production patterns.

The pandemic has emphasized the need to strengthen the resilience of the tourism sector, highlighting both the fragility of the natural environment and the need to protect it, as well as the intersections of tourism economics, society, health and the environment. This will entail both improved preparedness for future emergencies, and a commitment to strengthening the sustainability and resilience of the sector. At the same time, good governance, adequate financing and digitalization will strengthen its ability to regain its capacity to generate and maintain millions of jobs, promote inclusion and provide opportunities.



Against this background, there is now a growing consensus among tourism stakeholders as to how the future resilience of tourism will depend on the sector's ability to balance the needs of people, planet and prosperity.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, many countries are realizing a new reality for tourism, recognizing it as a key driver of a sustainable and green recovery and working towards transforming the sector accordingly. The challenge is to ensure that the response is integrated, holistic and statistically based, so that the sector recovers better, providing benefits to economies and biodiversity conservation, reducing its high climate and environmental footprint, to achieve sustainable societies for all, with a special focus on making the sector more resilient, especially for tourism-dependent countries. The cross-cutting nature of the tourism sector highlights the need for coherence and cooperation between representatives of very different sectors related to tourism and across the tourism ecosystem in order to promote and strengthen sustainability.

1 <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-covid-19-and-transforming-tourism>

2 <https://www.unwto.org/covid-19-oneplanet-responsible-recovery>

3 <https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-05/210504-Recommendations-for-the-Transition-to-a-Green-Travel-and-Tourism-Economy.pdf>

According to UNWTO/ITF research⁴ released in December 2019 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP25 in Madrid, the tourism sector was on track to increase its CO₂ emissions by at least 25% by 2030 if the current climate ambitions of the sector remain unchanged. While the COVID-19 pandemic led to a reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions globally in 2020, emissions already rebounded in 2021, reaching their highest ever absolute level. It is therefore expected that emissions from tourism will also rapidly rebound as operations restart and therefore the need to transform tourism operations for climate action continues to be of utmost importance for the sector to remain in line with international goals.

In light of the above, and in order to address one of the biggest threats that modern humans have ever faced, in November 2021, at UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, UNWTO launched the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism⁵ with the aim of building a consistent approach that will accelerate climate action in tourism.

The Glasgow Declaration developed within the framework of the One Planet network is a voluntary commitment which requests organizations make the following commitments:

- to support the global commitment to halve emissions by 2030 and achieve Net Zero by 2050 at the latest;
- to deliver climate action plans (or update existing plans) within 12 months of becoming signatories and implement them;
- to align their plans with five pathways, namely: measure, decarbonize, regenerate, collaborate and finance;
- to report publicly on progress made implementing those commitments;
- and to work on a collaborative spirit.

The Glasgow Declaration has already welcomed more than 500 signatories⁶ ranging from destinations, businesses and supporting organizations. It is one of the sector's clearest and strongest commitments to address the challenges of climate change and to lead the necessary transformation of tourism.

4 <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/tourism-emissions-climate-change>

5 <https://www.unwto.org/the-glasgow-declaration-on-climate-action-in-tourism>

6 <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/programmes/sustainable-tourism/glasgow-declaration/signatories>