



# **Global Sustainable Tourism Council**

## ***Zero Tolerance Policy***

***NO child labor, human exploitation, discrimination, wildlife abuse,  
and unnecessary single-use plastics***

### **Introduction**

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council® (GSTC) is widely recognized in the sustainable travel and tourism industry for its tireless work to promote greater awareness, understanding, adoption, and demand for sustainable tourism practices worldwide. The GSTC currently focuses its efforts on five major areas: 1) Developing International Standards; 2) Providing Assurance for Sustainable Tourism; 3) Fostering Sustainable Destinations; 4) Enabling Market Access for sustainable tourism products and services; and 5) Enhancing Knowledge.

Throughout its history, the GSTC has championed a common language for sustainable tourism, known as the [GSTC Criteria](#), uniting key stakeholders in the tourism sector, including national and regional governments, major travel companies, hotels, tour operators, NGOs, individuals, communities, certification bodies, academia, and more. Based on these standards, the GSTC has promoted the implementation of best practices across destinations and within the tourism industry.

This commitment has enabled the development of assurance services that today lend credibility and prestige to Certification Bodies and the businesses certified by them around the globe. Our determined and collaborative work is driven by the belief that tourism, when managed under sustainability principles, can be a powerful vehicle for social, cultural, and economic good.

Despite these strides, the GSTC acknowledges that this journey, while on the right path, faces detours and challenges that must be recognized and addressed. The growth of tourism has both direct and indirect impacts on critical issues, including child labor, human exploitation, discrimination, wildlife abuse, and the excessive use of single-use plastics.

This zero-tolerance policy represents the GSTC's unwavering commitment against these harms. It calls for members and non-members alike to adopt aligned measures and take action to eliminate these issues from their destinations and operations. Additionally, it expects accredited and recognized certification schemes to rigorously evaluate practices linked to these issues and report occurrences without delay. Ultimately, the GSTC aspires for this policy to inspire all tourism stakeholders to embrace a culture of prevention and continuous improvement, actively reporting any cases related to child labor, human exploitation, discrimination, wildlife abuse, and unnecessary single-use plastics.

## Child Labor

Child labor is an urgent and serious global concern. As of early 2020, approximately 160 million children were engaged in economic activities. Alarming, about 20% of this child labor is concentrated in the service sector, which includes tourism and hospitality<sup>1</sup>. Child labor is a form of exploitation that deprives children of their childhood and fundamental rights, creating significant ethical and legal dilemmas within the tourism industry. This issue is particularly concerning in developing countries where one of the most severe forms of child labor also occurs: the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

GSTC is resolutely focused on the elimination of child labor in the tourism sector. In 2019, the [GSTC signed a Memorandum of Understanding](#) with The Code and ECPAT International. Since then, GSTC has been encouraging tourism stakeholders to support and adopt the Code, as a practical means of implementing child protection standards and combatting this crime worldwide. GSTC Criteria requires the organizations certified by GSTC-Accredited Certification Bodies to diligently maintain accurate records of employee ages to verify the absence of child labor, as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO). By instituting rigorous age verification procedures, GSTC aims to safeguard children's rights and champion responsible labor practices throughout the GSTC-Certified\* organizations. Compliance is assessed during audits and certification renewals to ensure that no instances of child labor are present in the workforce.

On the other hand, this policy is relevant to all entities within the tourism sector, and every participant in the tourism ecosystem—tourism business, tourists, certification bodies, and local communities—plays a crucial role in protecting children from exploitation.

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<sup>1</sup>International Labour Office, & United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). Child labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—ed\\_norm/—ipecc/documents/publication/wcms\\_797515.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—ed_norm/—ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_797515.pdf).

GSTC is unwavering in its commitment to a zero-tolerance stance on child labor, ensuring that all of its actions consistently reflect a firm dedication to upholding and protecting children's rights throughout the tourism industry.

## **Human Exploitation**

The growth of the tourism industry generates economic benefits, creates jobs, and fosters development opportunities. However, it can also lead to the exploitation of vulnerable populations, including children, adolescents, women, and minorities. Due to the hidden nature of human exploitation, it is challenging to determine its actual impact. The 2021 Global Estimates reveal that, on any given day, approximately 50 million people are subjected to modern slavery, either through forced labor or involuntary marriage.<sup>2</sup>

GSTC is firmly dedicated to combating all forms of human exploitation within the tourism sector, including human trafficking, modern slavery, harassment, commercial, sexual, or any other form. As part of the commitment made by GSTC, the global Criteria for destinations, hotels, tour operators, MICE, and attractions establish mandatory requirements that must be carefully implemented and evaluated during accreditation and certification processes. GSTC mandates that organizations implement comprehensive policies to prevent human exploitation, particularly targeting children, vulnerable groups, and minorities.

Within this context, GSTC stands resolutely committed to no tolerance against all forms of human exploitation, ensuring that its guidelines and actions actively uphold the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable in society.

## **Discrimination**

One of the main historical drivers of travel around the world has been the desire to learn about and discover different cultures, customs, traditions, and ways of life. Tourism fosters connections between people from diverse cultures. Yet, discrimination remains a widespread issue in today's travel and tourism industry. This discrimination appears not only in interactions between tourists and local communities but can also be deeply rooted in the industry's labor practices, affecting recruitment, selection, hiring, and termination processes. In any case, its effects are unacceptable and entirely contrary to the sustainability principles promoted by GSTC.

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<sup>2</sup> Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2022

\*Note: we use the term "GSTC-Certified" as shorthand for "Certified by a Certification Body that is GSTC-Accredited"

GSTC rejects any form of discrimination based on race, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, parental status, national origin, age, disability, political affiliation, or other factors not related to merit. Therefore, the global standards developed by GSTC to date (and those to come) include specific criteria aimed at ensuring that destinations, the industry (hotels, tour operators, MICE, and attractions), and their suppliers, as well as any member of the value chain, use them as a roadmap to eliminate discrimination in all its forms. Additionally, GSTC maintains strict oversight regarding any discriminatory behavior in the accreditation processes of certification bodies and in the certification of destinations and companies in the industry.

GSTC will not tolerate any discriminatory practices and is committed to investigating, correcting, and sanctioning any discriminatory actions that undermine the principles of equity and justice within its scope.

## **Wildlife Abuse**

People are naturally drawn to wildlife, especially while traveling, as these encounters provide unique opportunities for discovery, learning, immersion, and inspiration. The tourism sector is fully aware of this natural fascination, which is why wildlife and nature-related experiences have flourished. This vast range of offerings includes exemplary initiatives for contemplation and conservation, as well as activities that directly and cruelly threaten local flora and fauna, often without tourists being aware of it. It is estimated that around 110 million people worldwide visit cruel wildlife tourist attractions annually<sup>3</sup> contributing to the fact that at least 560,000 wild animals are confined in enclosures designed for tourism purposes across the globe<sup>4</sup>.

In light of the magnitude of the issue and its terrible effects and implications, GSTC expresses its strong condemnation of any form of wildlife abuse in tourism activities and emphasizes its complete incompatibility with the principles of sustainable tourism. [GSTC is a signatory of the WTTC Buenos Aires Declaration on Illegal Wildlife Trade](#)<sup>5</sup> and, additionally, through its global criteria, promotes a responsible and sustainable relationship between destinations, the industry, and wildlife.

GSTC is dedicated to preventing wildlife abuse in any form across the GSTC-Certified organizations, including hotels, tour operators, MICE venues and event organizers, and

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<sup>3</sup> WildCRU, 2016. Checking out of cruelty. World Animal Protection. In: <https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.au/siteassets/documents/reports/checking-out-cruelty-report-2016.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Moorhouse T. P., Dahlsjö C. A. L., Baker S. E., D'Cruze N. C., Macdonald D. W., 2015. The Customer Isn't Always Right—Conservation and Animal Welfare Implications of the Increasing Demand for Wildlife Tourism. PLoS ONE 10(10): e0138939. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0138939. Cited in: WildCRU, 2016. Checking out of cruelty. World Animal Protection.

<sup>5</sup> See: [wtfc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Travel%20and%20Tourism%20Declaration%20on%20Illegal%20Trade%20in%20Wildlife%202021.pdf?ver=2021-06-23-133540-133](http://wtfc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Travel%20and%20Tourism%20Declaration%20on%20Illegal%20Trade%20in%20Wildlife%202021.pdf?ver=2021-06-23-133540-133)

destinations. GSTC Criteria set out clear guidelines regarding wildlife interactions, animal welfare, and wildlife trade, requiring full compliance for certification. GSTC takes a zero tolerance stance towards any tourism activity that undermines or encourages the exploitation of wildlife and expects all member organizations, as well as GSTC-Certified destinations and businesses, to understand and implement the criteria as a matter of urgency. This entails ensuring that interactions with wildlife are non-invasive, managing them responsibly to avoid negative impacts, complying with relevant local, national, and international wildlife legislation, and rejecting illegal wildlife trade, especially involving species under threat.

With this approach against any form of wildlife exploitation, GSTC ensures that all actions reflect the highest standards of ethical responsibility and contribute to the protection of wildlife within the tourism sector.

## Single-Use Plastics

The tourism industry significantly contributes to global plastic pollution, with projections indicating that annual primary plastic production could reach 1.1 billion tonnes by 2050<sup>6</sup>. Increased tourism correlates with rising plastic waste, threatening ecosystems and human health<sup>7</sup>. Addressing this issue is essential for sustainable tourism practices and environmental protection.

In this direction, GSTC is committed to combating single-use plastics in tourism while engaging tourism industry and certification bodies to ensure compliance with the GSTC Criteria and strict performance requirements aimed at eliminating single-use plastics where feasible.

Additionally, [GSTC is a signatory of the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative](#), joining over 100 leading tourism organizations in committing to eliminating unnecessary single-use plastics, transitioning to reusable and recyclable models, and reporting annually on progress towards a circular economy of plastics by 2025. By promoting sustainable practices and responsible consumption, GSTC seeks to foster a circular economy within the industry.

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<sup>6</sup> Geyer, R. (2020). Production, use and fate of synthetic polymers in plastic waste and recycling. In *Plastic Waste and Recycling: Environmental Impact, Societal Issues, Prevention, and Solutions*. Letcher, T.M. (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.13-32.

<sup>7</sup> Kinnaman, T. C. (2010). Solid Waste Management in the Caribbean. *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies*. 38-60. [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1710&context=fac\\_journ](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1710&context=fac_journ) Accessed 17 April 2020.; Maione, C. (2019). Emergence of plastic pollution on tourism beaches in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Master's Thesis. School for Environment and Sustainability, University of Michigan [https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/148801/Maione\\_Carol\\_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/148801/Maione_Carol_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).; Tsakona, M., Rucevska, I. (2020). Baseline report on plastic waste. [https://gridarendal-website-live.s3.amazonaws.com/production/documents/:s\\_document/554/original/UNEP-CHW-PWPWG.1-INF-4.English.pdf?1594295332](https://gridarendal-website-live.s3.amazonaws.com/production/documents/:s_document/554/original/UNEP-CHW-PWPWG.1-INF-4.English.pdf?1594295332) Accessed 7 January 2021. ;World Wildlife Fund (2019). Plastic waste and climate change - what's the connection?. 4 July <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/blogs/plastic-waste-and-climate-change-whats-the-connection#gs.hei9mm> Accessed 10 April 2020.

GSTC Criteria applies to GSTC-Certified entities, mandating the elimination of single-use plastics during audits and certification renewals. Certification bodies audit efficient purchasing practices, emphasizing bulk buying to minimize plastic packaging.

Through these comprehensive efforts, GSTC is resolutely committed to a zero tolerance approach in all its actions to combat plastic pollution and uphold environmental integrity.

### **Enforcement & Compliance**

All stakeholders committed to making a positive impact in the tourism industry must adhere strictly to GSTC's Zero Tolerance Policy. Full compliance with the GSTC Criteria is mandatory for all GSTC-Certified entities and destinations. All stakeholders are expected to align their actions with this policy without exception and to achieve full compliance since the publication of the policy. Each stakeholder of GSTC holds the responsibility to monitor for non-compliance strictly and shall report any violations to GSTC promptly.

In the event of non-compliance, GSTC will evaluate its relationships with the parties involved, take necessary actions, and refrain from establishing partnerships if corrective measures are not implemented.