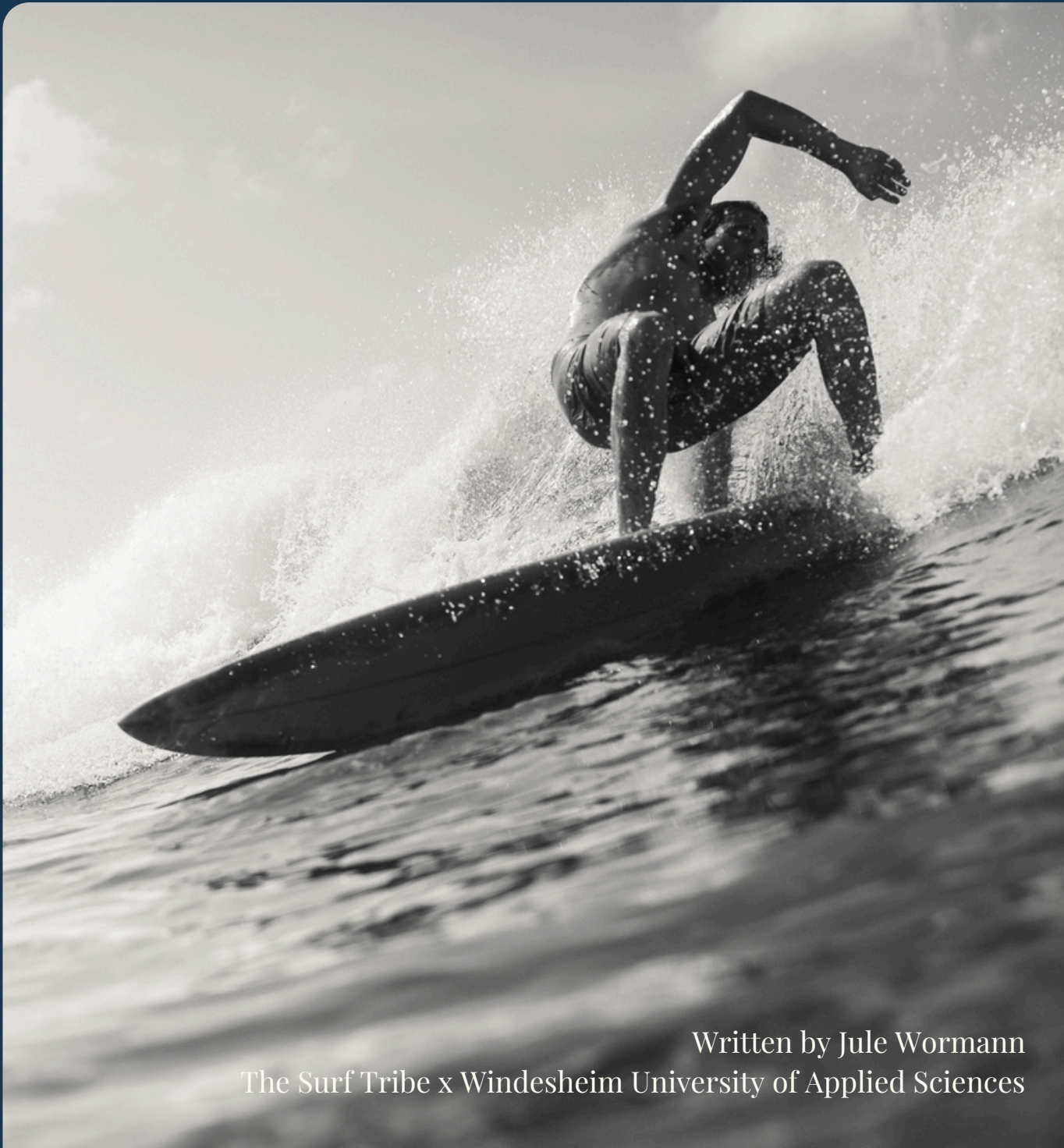


Surfing towards Sustainability

An Inspirational Guide for Small-Scale Surf Tourism Operators



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Foreword

This inspirational guide was developed for Small-Scale Surf Tourism Operators (SSSTOs), so if you are one of them, welcome! Whether you run a surf camp, a surf lodge, a surf school, a retreat, or a travel agency organising trips across the globe, if you have fewer than around 15 employees/ volunteers and want to strengthen your sustainability impact, ***Surfing Towards Sustainability*** is for you!

The research behind this guide explored how SSSTOs can strengthen their sustainability impact by examining which sustainable practices are realistically adoptable by SSSTOs given their unique organisational characteristics. Through ten conversations with experts in the field, managers, owners, and co-founders of SSSTOs, and an analysis of how twelve surf tourism operators communicate sustainability online, various findings and insights emerged.

One of the clearest findings was that sustainability in surf tourism is highly context-specific and no “one-size-fits-all” approach exists. What works for one operator may not work for another because factors such as location, business model, financial resources, infrastructure, organisational values, seasonality, and relationships with local communities all influence which practices are feasible and meaningful. For example, a destination-based surf camp operating in a remote coastal area may face very different sustainability challenges and opportunities than a travel agency organising international surf trips.

For this reason, ***Surfing Towards Sustainability*** should not be understood as a checklist or list of universal recommendations. Instead, it is intended as a starting point for inspiration, reflection, and practical ideas that you, as an operator, can adapt to your own context. So, in this guide, you will find key insights from the research, including SSSTOs’ strengths and barriers regarding sustainability adoption, and an overview of practices across environmental, social, and economic dimensions, each supported by real stories from the field.

Oh, and one more thing, no one needs to do everything, and perfection in sustainability does not exist. Trying, learning, and caring already create impact, especially in a sector so closely connected to nature and local communities. Sustainability (if you can actually call it this, in the context of the surf tourism sector...) is about making conscious decisions, continuously improving where possible, and recognising the responsibility we all share in protecting the places we love so much.

Lastly, from everything that came out of the research, one thing was clear: we all share the same goal of protecting the oceans, coastlines, cultures, and communities that make surfing possible in the first place. So hopefully, this guide can serve as a space to learn from and inspire each other while making sustainability a little more accessible and a little less overwhelming!

Enjoy reading ☀️

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Key Insights From the Research

If you are reading this, you probably already care about sustainability in some way or at least are curious about what sustainability could look like in surf tourism. So, you might be familiar with what I am about to say, but let's make sure we are on the same page:

Surf tourism is deeply connected to nature, local communities, and cultural exchange. Healthy oceans, thriving coastal ecosystems, and welcoming destinations are essential to the surf experience. At the same time, surf tourism activities often place pressure on the environments and communities they depend on. This creates a central paradox: while the industry relies on pristine coastlines and authentic local cultures, tourism itself also contributes to environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic marginalisation if not managed responsibly.

And yet the research showed something reassuring. Many SSSTOs already engage with sustainability in meaningful ways, even if they do not formally or publicly label their efforts. For example, one operator described not doing 'anything crazy' regarding sustainability, then listed seven different practices. Another just woke up one morning and decided to raise the minimum crew tip on their boat trips, not as a sustainability initiative, but because they could, and it felt right. So maybe you do not even realise it, but you are probably already doing things that matter.

But before we get into what more could be done, it is worth recognising what makes you, as a SSSTO, strong, because these are also your biggest sustainability benefits.





Your Strengths as a Small Surf Operator

You are close to the Places and People you work with

Small surf operators have a depth of local connection that larger tourism companies simply cannot replicate, because you know your destinations personally and have built real relationships with local guides, instructors, crew, partners, and communities, often over many years. This closeness is not just nice to have but makes authentic sustainability possible. It means the decisions you make about who to hire, who to source from, and how to engage with local communities are grounded in genuine knowledge and trust.

Quotes from Research

"We tried every location, we know the partner."
- Co-founder of a Surf Travel Agency operating worldwide

"They [small surf operators] are the ones that are closest to the communities. They are the ones that are closest to their customers."
- Sustainable Surf Researcher, UK

"We rely on locals. Something that we don't do is bringing our surf instructors from, I don't know, Switzerland to Morocco, and this is something we saw that some people do, and we don't like that."
- Employee of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

Quotes from Research

"I woke up in the morning and thought, why don't we just do \$150 instead of \$100? There's no decision-making. It's not like I need to go to someone and ask, can we do this? It was just like, we can do it. We do it. That's it."
- A Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

"The fact that we are small is also a strength, because we can decide things very quickly, make quick decisions, and also implement the ideas and decisions we make very quickly."
- Another Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

You are agile

Because your team is small and the hierarchy is flat, you can act on an idea almost immediately. There is no (long) approval chain, no investor to convince, no corporate policy to navigate, and if you wake up one morning and decide to change something, you can just change it. That kind of agility is rare and genuinely powerful.

Your values drive your decisions

Most SSSTOs did not start their business to maximise profit, but because of a deep connection to surfing, the ocean, and the lifestyle that comes with it. This foundation matters because it means sustainability is not an external motivation, but already part of why you do what you do. The research described SSSTOs' work as motivated by a desire to respect local communities, protect the environments in which they operate, and create meaningful experiences for guests.

Quotes from Research

"The goal is more for us to provide ourselves with a job that is aligned with our passion, rather than necessarily making a big profit, and to do it in a way that's respectful of the environment and of local communities."
- Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

"Surfing is a lifestyle for a lot of people. They do their business to facilitate that lifestyle, not the other way around."
- Sustainable Surf Researcher, UK

"The money is not the goal of the project... that's why we are happy with what we are doing in the way we are doing it, because we don't put money as the goal."
- Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

Quotes from Research

"Big companies they've got lost, lost touch with the consumer, with the people that they're supposed to be engaged with. They talk about sustainability, and they talk about sustainable development, but actually, they're not. It isn't their focus."

"You step away from that surfing space, you lose credibility. You lose authenticity. And if you're not authentic, people see that, it doesn't matter whether you're selling a product or delivering a service, you lose that credibility."

- Both, Sustainable Surf Researcher, UK

You are trusted

There is growing scepticism among travellers toward large tourism companies and their sustainability claims. Greenwashing is becoming more visible, and guests are becoming savvier. For small operators like you, authenticity is not a marketing strategy but embedded in how you operate



What Gets in the Way as a Small Surf Operator

Quotes from Research

"You've always got this kind of limited budget because it's a surfer business, a surfer bubble, it's just a low-budget thing."
– Former Surf Hostel Manager, Spain

"You have to take decisions sometimes, maybe to work with more volunteers. You cannot propose like super interesting salaries for people that are skilled."
– Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

Money is tight

Many sustainability initiatives, such as renewable energy systems, emissions measurement, water infrastructure, or formal certifications, require investments that are simply not accessible for most small operators. In these cases, sustainability is not about priorities, it is the reality you face.

Time and People are even tighter

Small teams carry enormous workloads. Founders and managers are often simultaneously running the operation, managing guests, maintaining partner relationships, and keeping the business financially alive. There is rarely spare capacity to sit down and plan, research, or implement new sustainability practices, even when the motivation is there.

Quote from Research

"We don't have the knowledge, we don't have the people who have the knowledge. We don't have time to implement it. We don't have the resources to implement it."
– Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

Quote from Research

"Sometimes, either you don't have the information, or you don't have the knowledge to judge whether this is a good project or not."
– Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

Sustainability is complex and sometimes confusing

Operators often struggle to know which actions genuinely create a positive impact. For example, carbon offsetting came up repeatedly in the research as a particularly difficult area, not because operators did not want to engage with it, but because they were uncertain about which projects were credible, locally relevant, and worth supporting.

Context shapes everything

In remote destinations, local infrastructure may simply not support certain practices. Waste management systems, renewable energy access, and water treatment facilities vary enormously from one location to another. What is easily doable in Portugal may be completely inaccessible on a boat in the Maldives.

Quote from Research

"If you're looking for a definitive answer around what works and what doesn't work, it's so organisation and place specific, that's really difficult to give an answer."
– Sustainable Surf Researcher, UK

So, what can you do with that?

Luckily still a lot!

The following practices are based on the research and were assessed against the specific realities of SSSTOs, including the strengths and barriers described in Section 1 of this guide. This means that although sustainability is always context-specific, these practices are more tailored to operators like you than general sustainability recommendations. Each one is grounded in real stories, quotes from operators and experts, and examples of how surf tourism operators publicly communicate sustainability. As mentioned, do not see it as a fixed recommendation but food for thought and pick what resonates, leave what doesn't, and adapt everything to your own context!

Two more things before diving in:

Quotes from Research

To identify where to start was actually recommended by two sustainability experts:

“What I would advise would be for them [small operators] to identify what within sustainability they want to contribute to. Would they like to contribute to the lives of people? Is it education? Is it health? Once they've identified that, they could start with a certain project and having a strategic goal that they revisit until they reach the vision that they want.”

- Sustainable Tourism Expert, Botswana

“Identify what you are doing and then make those small changes. Be realistic. Be practical. Yeah, aspirational, but be practical. You can't do everything, but you can definitely do something.”

- Surf Sustainability Expert, UK

Sustainability Dimensions (Environmental, Socio-cultural, and Economic)

One of the main findings of the research is that most practices address more than one sustainability dimension simultaneously. For example, hiring a local surf instructor keeps money in the local economy, and when that instructor shares their knowledge of the breaks and the local surf culture with guests, it also becomes an authentic socio-cultural experience. This shows that small actions can create a ripple effect across multiple areas simultaneously, which is one of the most encouraging things about sustainability in surf tourism.


Looking at the guide, these dimensions can help you to find your starting point in case you have a certain desire or goal you want to address first. So, for example, if protecting the ocean is closest to your heart right now, look for Env (Environmental), if strengthening your relationship with local communities feels most urgent, start looking at Soc (Socio-cultural), or if economic sustainability is what you are looking for, start with Eco (Economic). And the nice thing is, you will most likely address other dimensions as well while achieving your goal.


Icons as Guidelines

These icons aim to help you scan the overview and identify which practice(s) fit your current reality and which ones are worth keeping in mind for the future. But as always, context shapes everything. For example, what takes time for a solo founder might take a day for a slightly larger team, and what requires financial investment for one operator might already be available in the infrastructure of another.

In addition, the practices are organised into six themes to further simplify the navigation for you. But some of them, as mentioned earlier, belong to other categories as well due to the cross-dimensional character. Enjoy exploring!

 Your agility is the enabler (can be adapted quickly)

 Your local connection and relationships are the enabler

 Longer term vision (worth planning toward)

 Needs some time to research or set up initially

 Needs ongoing people or capacity to maintain

 Needs financial investment



Sustainable Practices



Community, Culture & Economy



Local Hiring & Training

Soc

Eco

When a new position opens, search locally first before looking externally. And if the skills you need do not yet exist locally, try to build them through internships, training positions, mentoring, or (if no other option) volunteering. Since local communities are often marginalised from economic benefits in surf tourism, local hiring is one of the most direct ways to address this problem. Using ‘there are no local skills’ as a reason to not hire locally is simply not valid, but also a missed opportunity to bring local knowledge about culture, language, and the destination to your operation.

Quotes from Research

“It would be easy to go into a destination and say, okay, nobody has the skills that we need. But then that also makes me think that the business isn’t there for the long term. So include them, it’s hard, it’s easier said than done, but I personally think that’s the avenue to try and take.”

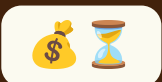
“As a company, creating a pipeline for local residents, educating them about what you’re doing, and providing opportunity for training, asking yourself: how do we build capacity for the local community to participate? It’s a long-term commitment.”

Both Quotes from Surf Sustainability Expert, Panama

! A note on volunteering: while volunteers can provide valuable support for genuinely small operations, be honest about the balance. Replacing paid local positions with unpaid foreign volunteers is not a sustainable or equitable practice, and it has been a widespread and uncomfortable reality in the surf hospitality sector for a long time.

“Surf houses would more likely have two, three, four volunteers rather than two local people paid. Many volunteers from Europe versus one or two local people paid, that’s what I saw in my experience.”

— Former Surf House Manager, Italy & Surf House Bar Manager, Morocco



Fair Wages and Growth Opportunities for Local Staff

Soc

Eco

Paying fair wages, at or above local standards, and creating genuine growth opportunities for local staff is not just ethical, it is a long-term strategy. Staff who feel respected and invested in stay longer, perform better, and represent the operation more authentically. Create space for local team members to learn new skills, take on more responsibility, and grow within the organisation.

Quotes from Research

“His team is well paid; surf instructors are highly professional. The cleaning team is well paid and treated well, because I saw that, and I can ensure it 100%.”

– Employee of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide, speaking about a local Moroccan partner

[Bisa Surf](#) reports that over 90% of their staff are local residents, earning fair wages with growth opportunities, showing that local hiring is achievable even for a small operator.

! One thing worth mentioning that rarely gets talked about: formal employment contracts are also part of fair treatment. In some destinations, informal cash arrangements are common, but official contracts protect both staff and operators in the long run.



Local Sourcing of Seasonal Food and Products

Env

Soc

Eco

Buying local and seasonal products reduces transport emissions while supporting local farmers, markets, and small businesses. If direct sourcing is difficult, try to do it partly. Even visiting local markets with guests creates a connection and keeps money in the local economy.

Quotes from Research

“If we can choose to source the food from local markets, we do it. But sometimes it’s not really possible because the market here is only once a week. But if we can choose to do it, we do it. And when we collaborate with chefs for retreats, we always try to work with people who we know source local products.”

– Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

Noah Surf House offers seasonal menus with local and organic ingredients whenever possible, and its organic garden provides fresh vegetables directly to the kitchen.



Respecting Local Customs and Culture

Soc

Operators can actively support cultural respect by educating guests during their trip about dress codes, religious practices, rules for certain spaces, attitudes toward photography, and social norms. Local staff are invaluable here as they carry this knowledge naturally and can navigate situations with sensitivity.

Quotes from Research

Surf Sustainability Expert from Australia shares their insights of a surf trip to Samoa: *“For example, if you go on a surf trip to Samoa, I was there, it’s over a decade ago now. But we landed on Saturday night, and we’re all frothing about surfing on Sunday, but you can’t, nothing happens on a Sunday. You can’t go surfing, you can’t work. Really, nothing happens on a Sunday. So, that was a shock to us, but that’s cross-cultural understanding. And in all of our rooms, there was a brochure saying ‘Hi, welcome to Samoa. Please be aware that you may be asked for money or whatever. Please don’t give money or goods to people who ask for it, because we don’t want to create a beggar society.’ That was the first time I kind of thought about that it is more about making us feel good, other than actually making a difference.”*



Including Cultural Practices in the Program

Soc

Encourage genuine cultural exchange by including local dances, crafts, traditional sports, history, or language in the guest program. This gives locals ownership by involving them as facilitators, not as performers or entertainers. To ensure this, hold cultural experiences in traditional environments rather than staged ones. The goal here is to create a meaningful experience for locals as much as for guests.

Quotes from Research

“Things like having a local dance troupe form around the surf camp, to recognise their cultural dance, that’s important. It’s something that people want to see. Also, part of cross-cultural understanding.”

– Surf Tourism Sustainability Expert, Australia

“Ownership also brings in the authenticity of the particular service you are providing. Every single area has its own culture, and the people have their own lifestyles and ways of living. Involving them adds to the uniqueness of that particular operator’s offering.”

– Sustainable Tourism Expert, Botswana



Meaning a guideline rather than an action (worth keeping in mind)

Consulting Communities Before Establishing or Expanding Operations

Soc

Eco

This one is less of a practice and more of a principle to carry with you, especially if you are establishing yourself in a new destination or thinking about expanding. In remote or traditional locations, local community leaders, elders, or governance structures must be part of any decision-making. Tourism that arrives without consultation often generates resistance, conflict, or long-term damage to community relationships that is very hard to repair.

Quotes from Research

“When you operate in somebody’s territory, in order to have the communities participate, it would be through some sort of empowerment, including them in the operation itself, consulting them with the establishment, so that they have some form of ownership.”

– Sustainable Tourism Expert, Botswana

“A guy wanted to set up a surf school at the Ivory Coast in Africa, at first not really understanding the cultural dynamic that existed in that area and failing several times because he didn’t understand what the community needed. He didn’t understand what would create trust. He didn’t understand what he had to do in that environment to make it a success, and he had to even disregard the notion of success. It’s more about, okay, how do I do something positive?”

– Surf Sustainability Expert, UK

⚠️ As this icon suggests, view this ‘practice’ as a compass, meaning something to orient by whenever you are making decisions that affect the communities around you.



Supporting Local Surf Access

Soc

If surfing is happening in a community but locals do not have meaningful access to it, consider how your operation can change that. Free lessons when sessions are not full, sharing board time, donating older equipment, or creating a dedicated program for local youth are all possible entry points.

Quotes from Research

“Teach them how to surf gives them ownership of the sport. They understand it, and they’re actually in the lineup, calling you into waves, saying no, you go.”

– Surf Sustainability Expert, Australia

Another example, not directly related to surfing but supporting access, is given by [Kala Surf](#), which keeps its surf skate park open every day and free for locals, giving kids and young people a safe space to practise, hang out, and grow their confidence on and off the board.

⚠️ This practice should be approached with caution. It is only meaningful and appropriate under very specific circumstances because in many surf destinations, locals already surf and have a deep history and cultural connection to surfing long before tourism arrived. The goal should never be to introduce surfing to a community that already has its own relationship with the ocean, because this risks cultural paternalism, where outsiders assume they have something to teach rather than something to learn. Instead, focus on removing barriers to access where they genuinely exist, and only act when communicated by the community itself.



Everyday Environmental Practices



Beach Clean-Ups

Env

Beach clean-ups do not solve pollution at a systemic level, and it is important to be honest about it. But they are a temporary relief for the environment and, more importantly, create awareness, start conversations, engage guests, and make the problem visible. You can partner with local initiatives that collect waste full-time and support their work.

Quotes from Research

“Regarding regular beach clean-ups, I think the goal is much more to raise awareness. Of course, yes, we clean the beach, but it’s a temporary thing. It’s not the way how you will solve environmental problems. But it’s for sure a way how you can raise awareness about the pollution.”

— A Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency - Operating Worldwide

Gota d’Agua Surf Camp, Lapoint and Bisa Surf are doing weekly beach clean-ups, with Lapoint stating to have collected more than 30 tonnes of plastic waste since 2017.

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Repairing and Maintaining Equipment

Env

Soc

This one seems obvious, but many operators avoid it because guests sometimes expect new equipment. Being transparent about why you maintain rather than replace materials changes the dynamic. Guests who understand the environmental and economic reasoning tend to appreciate it rather than question it.

Quotes from Research

“It is also important to maintain surf equipment so that you can use it as long as possible and not constantly need new stuff.”

— A former surf hostel manager, Spain



Upcycling and Donating Surf Materials

Env

Soc

Eco

Boards and wetsuits break and get old, but they do not have to become waste.

Use them for creative projects with guests (such as painting old boards for decoration), donate materials to organisations that recycle them into new products, or partner with local craftspeople who can transform them into something new. And if you have boards that still work but are no longer right for your lessons, donate them to NGOs such as Provide the Slide.

Quotes from Research

“We organised board collection events and drives, with Provide the Slide. They collect boards and materials and ship them from Europe to communities in West Africa.”

— A Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency - Operating Worldwide

DreamSea partnered with Garbags to transform their old glamping tents into backpacks, selling this as a limited-edition to guests at their reception.

Gota d’Agua gives old boards that are no longer suitable for lessons a new home and repurposes old wetsuits into products such as yoga mats, extending the life of materials while creating new products.



Vegan Day / Include Traditional Cultural Dishes

Env

Soc

Having one vegan or meatless day reduces environmental impact and encourages guests to think about food choices, while providing traditional local dishes creates cultural connection and supports local food knowledge. Ideally, local chefs and cooks are involved in this process, giving them ownership and ensuring authenticity.

Quotes from Research

Gota d'Agua offers vegan food options and provides guests with information about the environmental benefits of plant-based eating, integrating education directly into the meal experience.

Also, Lapoint introduced Meat Free Mondays across their camps, a simple, low-cost practice that signals values without requiring significant operational change.



Food Waste Reduction

Env

Eco

Track food waste patterns and adapt portions accordingly. Not every buffet needs to remain completely full until closing time, and leftovers can be creatively reused for staff meals the next day. It sounds like a small practice, and it is. But it is simple, immediate, and it saves money.

Quotes from Research

"We always adjusted the portions so that everyone was full, yet we still didn't have to throw much away. In fact, we could simply use the leftovers to eat ourselves as a team the next day. And that is always very cool."

— A former Surf Hostel Manager, Spain

Soul & Surf conducted waste audits across all their locations and created waste reduction plans, showing that even systematic tracking of food waste is a meaningful first step before any changes are made.



Composting of Food and Organic Waste

Env

If you have your own garden, set up a compost system and use it to enrich the soil. If not, look for someone nearby, a farm, community garden, or neighbour who has composting infrastructure and could benefit from your organic waste. Either way, food scraps become a resource rather than waste.

Quotes from Research

"We have a compost that then goes to the soil of the garden."

— Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

Kala Surf partnered with Urban Compost to turn kitchen scraps into nutrient-rich soil for local gardens, closing the loop on waste in a tangible way.

Soul & Surf attempted to compost themselves, but when it did not work out, they partnered with a local NGO called The Compost Revolution instead, showing honestly that finding someone else to do it for you is also a completely valid solution.



Reduce Single-Use Plastic

Env

Eco

Encourage guests to bring and use reusable water bottles, offer refill stations where tap water is not drinkable, and use biodegradable and reusable products for packaging, cups, straws, and containers. Start with the highest-volume items and build from there. You do not need to eliminate everything at once.

Quotes from Research

Kala Surf eliminated all single-use plastics across their camp and introduced refillable water stations and biodegradable cups and containers for all food and drinks, demonstrating that full elimination is achievable even for a small destination-based operator.

Bisa Surf made filtered water stations, bamboo straws, and reusable containers standard across all their camps: "Sustainability isn't a marketing buzzword for us, it's core to everything we do."



Recycling and Waste Separation

Env

Eco

Even in locations where no large-scale recycling system exists, having two separate bins, one for general waste and one for recyclables like plastic and glass, is a meaningful starting point. Recyclable materials can then be taken to a facility when available or to a local initiative to reuse them. These habits create awareness among guests.

Quotes from Research

Noah Surf House installed different containers for waste separation and a composting station that transforms organic waste into natural fertiliser for their organic garden, showing how recycling and composting can work together as a closed loop system.

⚠ However, in some destinations, recycling infrastructure simply does not exist. In those contexts, focus first on reducing waste at the source rather than separating it. As another Surf Sustainability Expert based in Australia stated: *"The solid waste is the main problem, you go to places like Lombok or Zimbabwe, it's just a landfill. Everything goes to a landfill and ends up in the ocean."*



Use of Eco-Friendly and Non-Toxic Cleaning Products

Env

Soc

Cleaning products are used daily in accommodations and shared spaces. Choosing non-toxic and environmentally friendly alternatives improves conditions for guests, staff, waterways, and surrounding ecosystems. In addition, selecting local sustainable suppliers can also support nearby businesses.

Quotes from Research

Gota d'Agua works with Greendet, a sustainable cleaning company operating in Portugal, which combines environmental and economic benefits.

DreamSea offers optional eco-friendly hygienic products such as shampoo, soap, and toothbrushes to guests



Partnerships, Collaboration & Donations



1% for the Planet Membership

Env

Soc

Eco

Donate 1% of your yearly revenue to approved environmental and/or social NGOs that you select yourself. It is a simple and structured way to support sustainability work that you cannot do alone. The platform makes it easy to find initiatives in your country and/or work field. If you already support a local NGO/NPO that is not yet on 1% for the Planet, you can recommend them so other members can donate to them as well.

Quotes from Research

“We collaborate with 1% for the Planet, a partnership where we donate 1% of our yearly revenue to NGOs [such as [Surf Cura](#) and [AIMM](#) in Portugal] that we select on their platform. We wouldn't have been able to do it if we weren't so flexible on deciding how we want to run our own company.”

- A Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

[Soul & Surf](#) is a member of 1% for the Planet and supports [Surfers Against Sewage](#) and [SISP](#) (Sebastian Indian Social Projects), a local initiative in Kerala, India, which aims to uplift the poorest people living in the coastal communities.



NGO/ NPOs or Community Partnerships

Env

Soc

Supporting local NGOs, NPOs, grassroots initiatives, or community projects through small donations, collaborations, guest involvement, or shared events can create more direct and visible local impact and strengthen community relationships. The closer the partner is to your destination, the more tangible the impact feels to you, the community, and your guests.

Quotes from Research

“The goal for me, for us, would be to strengthen our operation with local NGOs, try to give more back in the organised surf trips, to be more present and raise more awareness for our guests. So, inform them about all these projects that are going on, that we support them, that there are ways how you can give back to the communities and the places you organise your surf trip.”

- A Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

[Perfect Wave](#) collaborates with [SurfAid](#), an NPO improving health and well-being in remote surf communities, and with [Waves for Water](#), providing clean water solutions in the destinations they operate in. These community partnerships show that small operators can address needs that go far beyond surfing itself.



Education and Awareness Workshops

Env

Soc

Workshops can cover everything from ocean pollution and plastic waste to reef-safe sunscreen, surf etiquette, surf history, and local culture. Although you can organise everything yourself, you do not need to because partnering with local NGOs or 1% for the Planet partners creates the opportunity for co-hosting educational sessions as part of your normal program, which adds authenticity and raises awareness on a deeper level.

Quotes from Research

[The Surf Tribe](#) organises a workshop about marine conservation, hosted by their 1% of the Planet Partner, [AIMM](#), at their Algarve Retreat in Portugal.

[Soul & Surf](#) integrated ocean education directly into their surf program by creating a framework consisting of four pillars (ocean literacy, blue health, soul surfing, and wave riding), hosting a special microplastics workshop for guests and producing a series of ocean sustainability articles, showing that education does not have to be one event but can become part of the guest experience.



Include Your Guests



Opportunity for Donation or Per-Tourist Community Levy



Guests can contribute voluntarily or through a small, fixed levy towards infrastructure, environmental protection, education, or whatever the community identifies as its priority. Being transparent about where the money goes and how it is used makes guests far more open to contributing.

Quotes from Research

“Every surf tourist who comes in pays a levy that goes towards the local community, and they use that for water reticulation projects, aid posts, educational facilities, whatever they need.”
– Surf Sustainability Expert, Australia, describing an example in Papua New Guinea

Luex offers guests an optional eco fee to invest in reforestation projects and donate a tree for every written guest review, in collaboration with Eden Reforestation Projects. While this is also self-beneficial, it makes guests' contributions feel easy and visible.

Long-Stay Discounts to Reduce Travel Frequency



Longer stays reduce travel frequency while creating deeper cultural exchange, stronger guest connection to the destination, and often, a more relaxed operational flow for operators.

Quotes from Research

Soul & Surf offers long-stay discounts across all their locations to encourage longer trips and fewer of them, and explicitly shares sustainable travel tips with guests before booking and before arrival.

Encourage Guests to Avoid Flights or Take Direct Ones



If guests are travelling to a region with overland travel options, a train or bus almost always has a lower impact. When flying is unavoidable, direct flights produce fewer emissions. Providing this information before arrival supports guests who want to make more conscious choices.

Quotes from Research

Soul & Surf encourage guests to use the Greener Flights filter on Skyscanner, prioritise direct flights, and have introduced online retreats as an alternative to travel for guests who want the experience without the flight.

Gota d'Agua encourages guests to use carsharing or trains, framing it not just as an environmental choice but as a richer travel experience: “You also discover more of the journey.”



Sustainable Travel Education Pre-Trip

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Besides sharing information about travel options, you can also provide information about the culture, the country, local customs, language basics, and what to expect. Guests who arrive informed are more respectful, more curious, and more open to the experience. Local communities are more welcoming when they are met with understanding rather than assumptions.

Quotes from Research

“We have a welcome sheet that we send to guests, and there are a few pieces of information there, for example, regarding the conscious use of water.”

— Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

⚠ This does not need to be a detailed, long document. A simple pre-arrival email with a few cultural notes, practical tips, and a link to a local NGO you support can already make a meaningful difference to how guests show up. Once it exists, it does not need to be rewritten every time.



Promote or Provide Reef-Safe Sunscreen and Eco-Friendly Wax

Env

Every surfer needs these products, and surfing depends directly on healthy oceans and reefs. Promoting environmentally friendly surf products is a simple but visible way to encourage more conscious surf habits among guests. If you know a local shop, brand, or supplier offering these products, promote them, sell them, or create a small partnership so guests can access them easily.

Quotes from Research

The Surf Tribe partners with Suntribe, which focuses on mineral-based formulas, minimal ingredients and uses a lower-impact approach.

Gota d'Agua does the same with reef-safe sunscreen and additionally promotes eco-friendly wax through their blog articles, providing guests with context about why it matters before they even arrive.



Strategic Practices



Sustainability Communication

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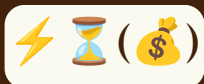
Soc

If you are doing something to strengthen your sustainability impact, communicate it! This can be as simple as a social media post or a dedicated sustainability page on your website, which takes time to build and someone to keep it updated. Start small, build from there and be honest. It is most credible when you share what is working, what is not, and what you are still figuring out. Guests increasingly value operators who show their work over those who make perfect-sounding claims.

Quotes from Research

Soul & Surf publishes an annual impact report sharing their progress, difficulties, and lessons learned, committing to transparency even when they did not achieve everything they wanted to do: “Disappointing not to achieve all that we set out to do, but being open and transparent about it is a big part of the process.”

One Co-Founder of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide, put it well: “There’s always a discrepancy between what you want to do and the way things are actually put in place. But at least we try to do our best from that point of view.”



Streamline Your Operations

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Eco

One of the biggest barriers to adopting sustainability practices is simply not having the time or mental capacity to think about them. Streamlining repetitive operational tasks, setting up automatic email reply systems, creating guest information documents so you do not have to explain the same things over and over again, and/or automating booking confirmations, frees up real time that can be redirected toward more meaningful work.

Quotes from Research

“I started to really realise how much time we lose doing the same things every day, like describing basic stuff to guests, or spending two hours a day replying to emails for reservations, if there is an automatic system doing it. All of this time saved can be invested in something more useful and meaningful.”

– Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

⚠ This is not a direct sustainable practice, but it might be the one that creates an opportunity to make others possible.



Diversify Your Offer

Env

Soc

If every operator, especially in busy destinations, offers the same thing, it is not only economically unsustainable for you individually, but can also contribute to overcrowding, which puts pressure on the very breaks and communities that make the destination worth visiting. Diversifying what you offer reduces that pressure, creates deeper, more meaningful experiences for guests, and keeps the revenue circulating within the local economy.

This does not mean abandoning surfing as your core offering, but it does mean thinking creatively about what your destination has to offer to make your operation genuinely unique.

Quotes from Research

“Instead of having three surf sessions a day, have one surf session in the morning and then have something else in the afternoon, like a cooking experience, a cultural tour, or something musical.

Whatever you add reduces the impact of overcrowding while adding something genuinely positive.”

— Surf Sustainability Expert, Australia

“What we would all love to do is focus on retreats where you surf with your heart, and you also understand the culture around you, deep surf talks, nice surf movies, genuine connection to the place.”

— Employee of a Surf Travel Agency, operating worldwide

“If it’s too many small operators offering the same thing, then in terms of economic sustainability, that’s not sustainable. Think outside of the box, be creative, diversifying your offer makes it economically sustainable for you as an operator and creates a competitive advantage.”

— Sustainable Tourism Expert, Botswana



Join or Form a Peer Coalition

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Eco

No single SSSTO can drive systemic change on its own. But a network of operators committed to the same destination, the same values, or the same challenges could be a great start. So, connecting with others who are facing the same realities might be one of the most powerful things you can do.

In practice, this could look very different depending on your context. It might mean joining an existing initiative or alliance that aligns with your values. It might mean connecting informally with other operators in your destination to share suppliers, practices, or knowledge. Or if you are a surf travel agency, it might mean using your unique position as a connector and distributor to inspire partnered operators regarding sustainable practices.

Quotes from Research

“Not any one organisation can do everything, but pulling together resources and looking for consensus, action that is practical and cost-effective, can lead to change. Expecting any small business to move mountains on their own is not ever going to work.”

— Sustainable Surf Expert, Panama

“Surf tourism agencies are hubs within these massive networks, they’re potentially information distribution points. They can seed sustainable practices into conversation through informal means. And in a sector as fragmented as surf tourism, that might be the most powerful kind of leadership there is.”

— Surf Sustainability Expert, Australia

Soul & Surf joined Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency alongside other travel companies because they state: *“we know we can’t tackle an issue of this size and complexity on our own”* showing that even a small operator can be part of something much bigger without needing a large budget or a dedicated sustainability team.



Bigger Investments



Energy Efficiency Measures

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Eco

Before investing in renewable energy systems, there is a lot you can do to simply reduce how much energy you use in the first place. Small infrastructure changes can make a real difference to both your environmental footprint and your operational costs. Things to consider include motion sensor lighting in low-use areas, switching to LED lighting wherever possible, double-glazed windows and doors to reduce heating loss, and programming air conditioning to switch off automatically when doors or windows are opened.

Quotes from Research

Gota d'Agua installed motion sensor lights in low-use areas and double-glazed all windows and doors, describing these as small changes that *“when implemented properly, can really make a difference.”*

Noah Surf House uses LED lighting, highly efficient heat pumps, and solar panels as a layered system, demonstrating that energy efficiency and renewable energy work best when combined rather than treated as either/or choices.

Some measures, like switching to LED lighting, are immediate and cheaper options. Other practices, such as double glazing or sensor systems, require more financial investment and planning time. But if energy efficiency is in your interest, it is worth approaching it in stages and starting with what costs the least.



Solar Panels and Renewable Energy

Env

Eco

Even though this is mostly a significant investment, some SSSTOs mentioned it, so here it is. It is one of the highest-impact environmental changes available, particularly in sunny coastal locations with high solar energy potential. Even a partial switch, such as powering hot water heating through solar, reduces dependence on fossil fuels and lowers costs over time.

Quotes from Research

“We have some basic systems that help to save a little bit of resources, like solar panels on the houses we are using.”
– Surf Camp Owner, Portugal

Noah Surf House installed solar panels, generating 70% of their water heating needs, combined with heat pumps for radiant pavement heating. Bisa Surf also runs its camps on renewable energy, with solar panels providing up to 60% of its electricity needs: All three operators show that even partial solar adoption and implementation at each stage can make a difference and is doable for SSSTOs.

Beyond solar, other renewable options are worth exploring, depending on your location, including wind energy, geothermal systems, and aerothermal heat pumps. Bio Surf Camp in Spain is currently implementing both solar and aerothermal systems, showing that the options go beyond the most obvious choices.

Rainwater Harvesting and Collection



Env

Eco

Rainwater can be collected, for example, in storage tanks for irrigation, cleaning, or sanitation purposes, depending on local infrastructure and filtration systems. It is especially useful in destinations with water scarcity or expensive water access, and over time, it can reduce operational costs significantly.

Quotes from Research

Noah Surf House in Portugal installed a rainwater harvesting system that redirects water to a well, used for toilet flushing, garden watering, and washing. This is an example of a meaningful reduction in water consumption that also saves money over time. Also, Kala Surf uses a rainwater collection system as part of a broader resource conservation approach.



Carbon Offsetting

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Eco

Carbon offsetting is widely discussed. And generally, the best approach is always to reduce emissions first.

Carbon offsetting can be a meaningful addition, but only when it's paired with other practices. When done well, with thorough research and locally relevant verified projects, it can compensate emissions that cannot be eliminated. The most impactful offset projects are those operating in or near the destinations you work in, so guests can see and connect with what their contribution supports.

Quotes from Research

“Carbon offsetting is really important but a little abstract, so you need kind of anchoring projects that are visible and local to the areas. You’re like, benefiting the place that you’re visiting, and you’re learning about local issues, why do we need to replant mangroves and stuff like that. So, I think there’s opportunities to do cool synergies like that.”

— Sustainable Surf Expert, Panama

“Regarding carbon offsetting, I’m undecided. If it means that they, as a company, are using that to say ‘we’re doing our bit, we don’t need to do anything else’, then I think there’s an issue. The cause-and-effect mechanisms between the two are very complicated. If that’s your get out of jail free card, you know, ‘I feel less guilty now because I’ve done that and we don’t need to invest in anything or do anything else’. I think in the long run that is counterproductive.”

— Surf Sustainability Expert, UK

Soul & Surf are explicit about their position: “We don’t plan to make future claims of carbon neutrality by simply paying to ‘offset’ our emissions. The real work is in cutting emissions. Offsetting is what you do with what’s leftover.” They partner with Mossy Earth for verified rewilding projects, including kelp restoration in Portugal.

Closing

Sustainability is a big term, and looking at the bigger picture often feels overwhelming. But you do not need to do everything, and you do not need to be perfect. Just start somewhere, pick one practice and try because small steps count too! And keep in mind to stay committed while being honest and transparent about your efforts, achievements, failures and your overall journey.

The research behind this guide made one thing clear: you, as small-scale surf tourism operators, are, in many ways, the solution. Your closeness to communities, your passion for the ocean, your agility, and your values give you a unique ability to approach sustainability, not as a marketing strategy, but as a genuine expression of why you do what you do.

Surfing towards Sustainability means we as surfers, are powerful because we are connected to nature, we need it, we understand it (at least we try), and we are close to the people living in the environment we love so much. So, let's give something back to this beautiful world we call our home!

For more inspiration, visit The Surf Tribe's sustainability page at: <http://www.thesurftribe.com/sustainability-the-surf-tribe>

Thank you for reading 🌞



This guide was developed based on empirical research conducted as part of a Bachelor's thesis on sustainable practices in small-scale surf tourism operators. The research included semi-structured interviews with SSSTOs and surf/ sustainability experts worldwide, and a web content analysis examining how 12 surf tourism operators publicly communicate their sustainability efforts across their websites and online channels. For any questions, comments, thoughts or more information, contact jule.wormann@thesurftribe.com.