

Sustainability: from a regulatory burden to a core driver of operational excellence

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This session reframes sustainability not as an additional layer of work, but as a practical tool for risk management, quality improvement, compliance, guest loyalty, and long-term business resilience.

1. Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

The idea of this session is to change the way we talk about sustainability.

Very often, sustainability is seen as one more layer added on top of everything else: quality management, compliance, risk management, reporting, guest expectations, and daily operations.

For many small and medium-sized tourism businesses, this can feel like extra paperwork, extra cost, and extra pressure.

But sustainability should not be treated as an additional burden. It can be used as a health check for the company.

Key message:

Sustainability is not only about giving back to the planet. It is a blueprint for business survival.

2. Challenges facing tourism businesses

Tourism businesses today face several pressures at once:

- heatwaves and storms
- water shortages
- rising energy prices
- changes in fossil fuel prices
- changing guest expectations
- stricter legal requirements
- pressure from booking platforms and certifications
- supply chain instability
- staff retention problems

This means that sustainability is no longer only an ethical question. It is also a practical business issue.

If a tourism business ignores sustainability, it may also ignore risks related to energy, water, reputation, compliance, finance, and demand.

3. What sustainability really means for tourism SMEs

Sustainability should be understood as a tool that connects several goals at once.

A good sustainability action should also help the company:

- reduce risk
- improve compliance
- improve quality
- strengthen guest loyalty
- reduce operating costs
- prepare for future regulation
- increase resilience to climate change

For example, installing solar panels is not only an environmental action. It also reduces dependence on volatile energy prices.

Water-saving systems are not only ecological. They help businesses prepare for droughts and possible restrictions.

Local suppliers are not only more sustainable. They can also make the supply chain more stable and less exposed to global price shocks.

4. Tools and approach: diagnosing climate vulnerability

Eco Union supports SMEs by helping them understand their vulnerability to climate change. One tool currently being applied is “Tourism More Resilient”. It allows companies to answer diagnostic questions and reflect on their exposure to climate risks.

The tool looks at areas such as:

- dependence on climate-sensitive resources, such as snow or beach access
- operational intensity, for example swimming pools, spas, energy use
- physical location and exposure to floods, fires, or heatwaves
- human capital and staff retention
- sector-specific vulnerabilities for hotels, campsites, marinas, mountain resorts, and tour operators

The purpose of the tool is not to solve everything automatically. Its value is that it helps SMEs reflect on their risks, choices, and priorities.

5. From guest expectations to operational excellence

One important driver of sustainability is the changing guest.

More travellers are looking for responsible and sustainable options. However, it is no longer enough to simply say “we are green” or “we are eco-friendly”.

Sustainability claims increasingly need to be proven through reliable evidence, and often through third-party certification.

Certifications should not be seen only as labels. They can work as audits of the company. They help businesses understand where they are exposed, where they can improve, and how they can communicate more credibly.

This also matters because green filters are increasingly used on platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb.

A certified and credible sustainability approach can therefore support:

- guest trust
- guest loyalty
- better reputation
- financial predictability
- stronger market positioning

6. Key areas of resilience

Several areas are especially important for tourism resilience.

Energy independence

Solar panels and energy-efficient systems reduce exposure to volatile electricity prices.

Smart systems can also reduce unnecessary consumption, for example by turning off heating or cooling in unused hotel areas.

Water security

In regions affected by drought, businesses need to think about how many days they can operate under restrictions. Rainwater use, greywater recycling, efficient filters, and drought-resistant gardens can all contribute to resilience.

Climate-adapted guest experience

Climate-related cancellations are increasing because of storms, heatwaves, lack of snow, or extreme weather.

Businesses need alternatives that allow guests to still have a good experience, such as indoor activities, cultural experiences, spas, covered tasting rooms, or wine cellars.

Supply chain resilience

Long-term relationships with local suppliers can reduce dependence on global price fluctuations and transport disruptions.

Staff retention

Retaining experienced staff is also a sustainability issue. Human capital makes organisations more adaptable to climate change and other disruptions.

Cooperation

Relationships with other businesses, destinations, suppliers, clients, and public authorities create social capital. This acts as a buffer in times of crisis.

7. Communication with guests

One important challenge is how to ask guests to behave sustainably without making them feel that the business is simply saving money at their expense.

The key is coherence.

If a hotel asks guests to save water or energy, it should also show what the hotel itself is doing.

For example:

- installing solar panels
- using water-saving technologies
- reducing food waste
- investing in efficient systems
- supporting local suppliers

Communication should be simple, positive, and concrete.

Instead of abstract numbers, businesses should use examples that guests can understand.

For example, instead of saying “we saved 34 kilograms of food”, explain what this equals in meals or practical benefits.

The guest should feel part of a shared effort, not responsible for solving the company’s sustainability problems.

8. Legal and financial pressure

Sustainability is also becoming a regulatory issue.

From September 2026, vague claims such as “eco-friendly” or “green” will become much harder to use without evidence. Companies will need to support sustainability claims more clearly.

Larger companies will also face stricter sustainability reporting requirements, including supply chain requirements. This means that smaller tourism suppliers may also be asked to meet sustainability standards if they work with larger companies.

Banks and finance providers are also starting to include green requirements in financing decisions.

This creates both pressure and opportunity. Businesses that prepare early will be in a stronger position.

9. Key takeaway

Sustainability should not be treated as extra paperwork.

It is a practical tool for understanding risks, improving operations, strengthening guest trust, and preparing for the future.

The most resilient tourism businesses will be those that use sustainability not as a marketing slogan, but as part of everyday decision-making.