

Sonoma County Tourism's Sustainability Terminology Guide



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SONOMA COUNTY
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“Sustainability”

The word sustainability is typically used in reference to environmental sustainability, but the term encompasses three distinct components: **Planet**, **People**, and **Profit**.

Planet = Environmental Sustainability: Avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance.

People = Social Sustainability: Utilizing resources in a manner that does not compromise but rather elevates human rights and protections. Health, educational access, democracy, cultural preservation, and the political empowerment of women are just some of the elements of social sustainability.

Profit = Economic Sustainability: Maintaining economic growth as a driving force for societal progress and well-being (e.g., reducing hunger and improving global quality of life).

Note below how GSTC’s definition of sustainability succinctly touches upon the three pillars: **Planet**, **People**, and **Profit**.



“Using resources in an **environmentally responsible**, **socially fair** and **economically viable** manner, so that by meeting the needs of current users, the possibility of their use by future generations is not compromised.”

- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

“Sustainable Tourism”



“Sustainable tourism takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. Sustainable tourism should make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the sociocultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance; ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socioeconomic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.”

- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)



“Tourism that leads to the management of all resources in a manner that economic, social, and aesthetic needs are fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biodiversity, and life-support systems.”

- Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)



“Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.

[It] refers to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.”

- United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

“Responsible Tourism/Travel”



“The behavior of individual travelers aspiring to make choices according to sustainable tourism practices. The behaviors usually align with minimizing the negative impacts and maximizing positive ones when one visits a tourism destination. Responsible Travel is a term referring to the behavior and style of individual travelers. The behaviors align with making a positive impact to the destination rather than negative ones.”

- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)



“Tourism that maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts, and helps local people conserve fragile cultures and habitats.”

- Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)

Responsible or Sustainable?



Visitors using the “Give and Get” hotel booking platform Kind Traveler could certainly be described as considerate, since their donations benefit local causes. But while that action is in line with the social sustainability pillar, I would avoid describing the use of Kind Traveler as “being sustainable” and instead describe it as “responsible.”

“Ecotourism”



“A niche segment of tourism in natural areas.”

- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)



“Nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.”

- United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

With Sonoma County representing one of California’s most diverse natural regions, our outdoor offerings undoubtedly influence visitation to our destination. That said, **I would be cautious in applying the term “ecotourism” to Sonoma County.** The word, having first gained traction in the 80s, has been applied erroneously and misleadingly around the globe for decades, and has seen decreased usage in favor of newer – and arguably more precise – terminology (e.g., “sustainable tourism,” “responsible tourism”).



“Regenerative Travel/Tourism”

Regenerative Travel/Tourism is an aspirational concept that imagines visitation to a destination not only producing no negative social, ecological, and economic impacts, but rather resulting in net positive outcomes in all areas.

Proponents of Regenerative Travel contend that with a rapidly warming climate, biodiversity loss/species extinction, and the looming depletion of natural resources, tourism must not only prevent degradation but restore damage that has already occurred.

By providing our visitors with knowledge, resources, and incentives to offset their carbon emissions (beyond their carbon output), contribute to projects that enhance the destination (i.e., building a community garden), and spending their tourism dollars in ways that support small or minority owned businesses, we can say that we promote regenerative practices, but we should be mindful about making any claims of our visitors engaging in true Regenerative Travel.

The High Bar of the Regenerative Traveler



Distilled Definitions

Sustainability is the practice of using resources in an environmentally responsible, socially fair, and economically viable manner, so that their use by future generations is not compromised.

Sustainable Tourism takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.

Responsible Travel refers to the behaviors or motivations of travelers to make positive impacts to the destinations they visit rather than negative ones.

Ecotourism is an outmoded term that describes nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature and the traditional cultures in natural areas.

Regenerative Travel is an aspirational concept that imagines visitation to a destination not only producing no negative social, ecological, and economic impacts, but instead restoring the natural environment, enhancing the quality of life for inhabitants, and improving economic conditions.

Comparing Sustainable, Responsible, and Regenerative Travel

Category	Impacts	Features
Sustainable Travel	Accounts for current and future impacts.	Clearly defined pillars: Environmental, Social, and Economic sustainability.
Responsible Travel	Largely focuses on current impacts (minimizing negative, maximizing positive).	A less structured and more versatile term that doesn't necessarily need to touch upon all three pillars in its use.
Regenerative Travel	Endeavors to repair past damage, while enhancing the present and protecting the future.	Newer buzz word. Aspirational. Something to aim for.

