



Destination Sustainability Certification: Analysing International Standards Through the Lens of GSTC Criteria

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Abstract

Numerous certification standards have been developed as tools for the appraisal of sustainability and ensuring total quality management in destinations. These standards are widely adopted across various countries and have become a benchmark of destination performance. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is the apex organization responsible for designing global standards for destinations and tourism industry worldwide. Using the GSTC standard as a normative reference, many recognized and accredited certification bodies certify destinations and tourism businesses. With the growing number of standards and certification agencies available, destination boards face challenges in selecting the most appropriate certifier that aligns with their specific sustainable initiatives. This highlights the need for a comparative analysis of various standards, criteria and indicators of predominant certifiers. This study presents a detailed analysis of five major global certifiers whose full standards are publicly available. It aims to equip destination authorities with a comprehensive understanding of the various certification bodies to conduct self-assessments and determine how well they perform across various sustainability dimensions before choosing a certification program that best matches their sustainable initiatives and objectives.

Keywords: Destination certification, Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), Certification bodies, Certification standards

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1. Introduction

Certification ensures that a product or activity meets a set of minimum standards. Certification aims towards sustainable destination management thereby augmenting infrastructure amenities and image of the destinations towards an improved visitor experience. It also assists destination managers to professionally manage them towards achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). They also bring in avenues for holistic development and ensure regular flow of visitors to these tourist sites.

Tourism businesses and destinations view certification as a potential tool to communicate their sustainability best practices to tourists and visitors (Font et al., 2016). The certification schemes act as a catalyst for transformation of destinations and tourism businesses and have a long-term impact by market introduction of innovative sustainable products (Rheede et al., 2010; McLennan et al., 2016). Constantin et al., (2013), have identified certification schemes can be international, national, or local and is promoted by industrial, governmental, and non-governmental institutions. The study observed that these schemes are aimed at recognition of business units and stakeholders. The market for certification and its success is driven by both companies and consumer demand.

2. Literature Review

Tourism certification schemes have seen a progressive evolution over the last few decades. The motel classification in United States, accreditation of tourist guides in Europe and the worldwide star classification of hotels can be considered the earliest examples towards quality assessment in tourism sector. Mazilu et al., (2017) identified three distinct phases of tourism certification. This includes 'quality certification' using a ranking system or star classification targeting hospitality sector; followed by 'ecotourism certification' or 'Ecolabels' including Blue Flag for beaches and Green Key for hotels, which will eventually lead to 'sustainable tourism certification'. Ecolabels were expected to improve environmental performance and management activities and influence environmental impacts of the firms (Esparon et al., 2014). Since, ecolabels addressed environmental sustainability primarily, tourism destinations and businesses experienced the need to address numerous socio-economic challenges and issues and develop indicators to measure them in certification schemes (Font and Harris, 2004; Basera et al., 2022).

Sustainability certification gained momentum with the 'Earth Summit' of 1992. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2002), there were more than sixty environmental tourism certification schemes, most being voluntary standards based in Europe split along government, NGOs, public, and private sector. Jarvis et al., (2010), found that the number had

grown to eighty certification schemes by 2007 and to over 200 certification schemes by the end of the first decade of the millennium. This proliferation emphasized the necessity among tourism stakeholders for the establishment of a unified platform and standardized tourism framework for certification, and the establishment of a global accreditation body to supervise and regulate these diverse schemes. This need guided to 'Mohonk Agreement' in 2000 in consultation with over thousand organizations and professionals in twenty-six countries and culminated in the establishment of Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) (Jarvis et al., 2010; Bricker and Schultz, 2015; Panzer-Krause, 2017). STSC was replaced by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) in 2010 which has since then developed globally recognized standard criteria and indicators for both tourism destinations and tourism industry (GSTC Accredited manual, 2018; GSTC Recognition Manual, 2020). Currently, these standards are widely used by numerous countries and certification bodies worldwide. An overview of major timeline of evolution of tourism certification has been compiled in Table 1.

Table 1: Evolution of Certification

| Evolution of Certification | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Beginning of 20 th century | The Mobil 5-star system by The American Automobile Association (AAA), The Michelin guides in Europe & Five-star system of hotels |
| 2 | 1987 | Beginning of beach ecolabel – Blue Flag & launch of Earthcheck certification |
| 3 | 1988 | Silberdistel Label: one of the first labels for Accommodation |
| 4 | 1992 | Earth Summit – decision to promote eco certification for tourism industry; launch of Rainforest Alliance certification |
| 5 | 1994 | Launch of Green Globe certification |
| 6 | 1996 | ISO 14001 – Environmental Management Systems |
| 7 | 1997 | Launch of Biosphere certification |
| 8 | 2000 | Mohonk Agreement for sustainable and ecotourism certification; launch of Travelife certification |
| 9 | 2002 | UNWTO official research on certification schemes |
| 10 | 2008 | Launch of Green Step certification |
| 11 | 2009 | Formation of Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council; Launch of TourCert |
| 12 | 2010 | Formation of Global Sustainable Tourism Council; Launch of Vireo |
| 13 | 2014 | GSTC started recognition of sustainable tourism standards; launch of Green Destinations |
| 14 | 2016 | GSTC started the accreditation of certification bodies through American Psychological Association (APA) |
| 15 | 2019 | Formation of Travalyst criteria |
| 16 | 2023 | GSTC started the accreditation of certification bodies by itself |
| 17 | 2024 | European Union's Green Claims Directive; Formation of the Tourism Sustainability Certifications Alliance (TSCA) |

In the tourism sector, the development of eco-labeling and certification systems has been geographically and sectorally uneven with two thirds of the schemes concentrated in Europe and over 60% targeting the accommodation sector, followed by travel and tour sector, and attractions (Grapentin and Ayikoru, 2019). Despite their proliferation, most schemes exhibit limited market penetration and insufficient coverage (Gossling and Buckley, 2014; Nistoreanu et al., 2020). Political dimensions can play a prominent role in the implementation of tourism certification schemes which is evident in the case of major European systems like Ecomanagement and Audit Scheme (EMAS), European Centre for Eco and Agro Tourism (ECEAT), European Network for Sustainable Tourism Development (ECOTRANS), European Union Ecolabel, and Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT) which are controlled and monitored by European Union and regional coalitions (Mihalic et al., 2012). Many of these certification schemes are grouped as either achievement oriented which emphasize the attainment of specific sustainability benchmarks, or process oriented which focus on continuous improvement and adherence to sustainable practices (Panzer-Krause, 2017). The growing number of certification schemes, particularly in Europe, resulted in 'greenwashing' where many self-assessment labels lack independent third-party verification, authenticity, and transparency, and thereby misleading consumers. In response to this issue, the European Parliament passed the 'Anti Greenwashing Act' in 2024, ultimately leading to the European Union Green Transition and Green Claims Directives, both scheduled to take effect in 2026 (Directive of the European Parliament, 2024; Ragonnaud and Ashton, 2024).

In the long COVID scenario, certification bodies within the tourism sector have increasingly come together to form strategic alliances for enhancing sustainability standards. One notable initiative is the creation of the *Travalyst* platform, which has recognized forty-nine sustainability certification schemes which comply with its guidelines for tourism businesses that meet its global guidelines for tourism businesses (www.travalyst.org). Furthermore, certified entities under these transparent schemes are featured on major online travel platforms including Booking.com and Google Travel (www.travalyst.org). In another significant development, ten leading certification organizations in sustainable travel and tourism established the Tourism Sustainability Certification Alliance (TSCA) to promote improved practices and strengthening stakeholder cooperation (www.tourismsustainability.org).

2.1. Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

GSTC serves as the international apex body for developing sustainability standards and criteria for tourism destinations across the tourism sector worldwide. Established in 2010, as a coalition between three different

United Nations entities: the UN Foundation, the UNEP, and UNWTO, headquartered in Washington DC, US (www.gstc.org). GSTC aims 'to improve tourism's potential to be a driver of positive conservation and economic development for communities and businesses around the world and a tool for poverty alleviation' (GSTC Accredited manual, 2018; GSTC Recognition Manual, 2020). The overarching objectives of the GSTS are to advance sustainable destination management and promote the triple bottom line pillars of sustainability-economical, environmental and social dimensions-to tourists, resident communities, and other related stakeholders (www.gstc.org).

The GSTC criteria are considered as the minimum requirement for a tourist destination or businesses to be acknowledged seeking certification, aligned with tourism principles (www.gstc.org). Originally, GSTC had three sets of standards: for accommodation businesses, for travel and tour companies, and for destinations (GSTC Accredited manual, 2018; GSTC Recognition Manual, 2020). In 2024, it expanded the scope by introducing two additional standards tailored precisely for attractions and the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry (www.gstc.org).

Essentially, GSTC does not involve directly in certifying tourism businesses or destinations but assesses and acknowledges third-party certification systems as being equivalent to its own certifying standards (GSTC Accredited manual, 2018; GSTC Recognition Manual, 2020). Furthermore, the GSTC recognizes other sustainability standards (GSTC recognized) and accredits certification bodies (GSTC accredited), ensuring that these entities meet benchmarks for impartiality, transparency, and adherence to globally accepted auditing practices (www.gstc.org). While recognition is an equivalency compliance of the standard to GSTC criteria, the accreditation process involves a thorough review of both the certifier's standards and their operational procedures, particularly the use of independent third-party auditors to ensure total conformity and compliance (GSTC Accredited manual, 2018; GSTC Recognition Manual, 2020).

2.2. Major destination standards and certification bodies

As of May 2025, there are six global organizations providing sustainability certification for destinations complying with GSTC criteria (www.gstc.org). Among these, there are three GSTC accredited certification bodies: Earthcheck, Green Destinations, and Vireo, and one certifier, Green Step using GSTC recognized standard (www.gstc.org). Two more certifiers, Biosphere and TourCert, were previously recognized by the GSTC have become the members of the TSCA (www.tourismsustainability.org). Nevertheless, these certification bodies are using standards that align with GSTC criteria. Table 2 presents a comprehensive outline of globally operating destination certification bodies including the various levels of certification awards they confer.

Table 2: Typology of destination standards
(Source: Standards of the six certification bodies)

| No. | Name of certification body | Country of origin | Presence | Type of alignment | Levels of certification awards | Standard used for certification |
|-----|----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|--|---|
| 1 | Earthcheck | Australia | Global | GSTC accredited | Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum | Earthcheck Destination Standard |
| 2 | Green Destinations | The Netherlands | Global | GSTC accredited | Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, GSTC certified | Green Destinations Standard, GSTC Destination criteria, Mountain Ideal standard, South Tyrol standard |
| 3 | Vireo | Italy | Global | GSTC accredited | GSTC Certificate | GSTC Destination criteria, South Tyrol standard |
| 4 | Green Step | United States | North America | GSTC recognized | Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum | Green Step Destination Standard and Criteria |
| 5 | Biosphere | New Zealand | Global | TSCA | Certified, Gold, Platinum | Biosphere Destination Standard and Criteria |
| 6 | TourCert | Germany | EU, Americas | TSCA | Sustainable Destination | TourCert Destination Criteria |

Apart from these global standards, GSTC recognizes destination standards developed by the tourism boards of countries including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Norway, and Ecuador for national application (www.gstc.org). These standards serve as important sustainability frameworks within the jurisdiction; they are not intended for certification purposes. The list also includes regional level standards like Mountain Ideal Destination Standard in United States, South Tyrol's sustainable tourism standard in Italy, Cabo Verde Sustainability standard for the West African archipelago in the Atlantic, Pacific Sustainable Tourism Destination Standard for islands in the Pacific, and Destination Wayfinder Framework and Standard (www.gstc.org).

Notably, some of these regional certification standards have established partnerships for certification purposes. For instance, the Mountain Ideal Standard has entered into an agreement with Green Destinations to support destination certification within its region (www.hub.walkingmountains.org). Similarly, the South Tyrol Sustainable Tourism Standard has established partnerships with both Green Destinations and Vireo to facilitate the certification of destinations in South Tyrol (www.suedtirol).

info). Such collaborations demonstrate a rising trend toward aligning regional sustainability efforts with internationally recognized certification mechanisms, thereby enhancing credibility and comparability across destinations.

All the major certification standards have been innovative in developing their own online platforms for data documentation, reporting, assessment, and audit. Apart from granting the certification award, these schemes also assist destinations in sustainability consultancy, and offer various training and capacity building programs (Source: web portals of the certification standards).

2.2.1. Earthcheck: Earthcheck was established in 1987 in Queensland in Australia and has expanded to seventy countries globally. The certification program is constructed on Agenda 21 principles and has two distinct phases of benchmarking and certification (www.earthcheck.org). It involves six key steps to develop a sustainable community: destination authority, commitment and policy, benchmarking, compliance, planning for continual improvement, and consultation, communication, and reporting (Earthcheck Destination Standard, 2022). Destinations are awarded Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum based on their score and performance (Earthcheck Sustainable Destinations, 2020).

2.2.2. Green Destinations: Green Destinations, based in the Netherlands was constituted as a research foundation in 2014, and has more than half the market share of total awarded destinations worldwide despite being the last one to be launched among the major schemes (See Table 3). Unlike other certification schemes, it operates in more than fifty countries and offer awards in different brands (www.greendestinations.org). It collaborates with regional and thematic certification bodies including Quality Coast, Slovenia Green, Ecotourism Australia, Mountain Ideal, and South Tyrol standard (Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism, www.slovenia.info, ecotourism.org.au, www.hub.walkingmountains.org, www.suedtirol.info, www.goodtravel.guide). The schemes are structured by Green Destinations Standard assessment and reporting system which has eighty-four criteria spread across six broad themes of destination management, nature and scenery, environment and climate, culture and tradition, social wellbeing, and business and communication (Green Destinations Standard, 2021). The organization also offers comprehensive tools for destination baseline assessment, impact assessment, Key performance indicators and benchmarking, UNSDGs assessment, business sector sustainability scan, and tourism and climate action planning (www.greendestinations.org). Based on their performance across these criteria, destinations can accomplish one of five certification levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, or 100% Sustainable Destination after a prolonged engagement and certification phase.

2.2.3. Vireo: Vireo SRL, an Italy based organization, provides commercial certification for various eco-certification schemes including Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)(www.vireosrl.it). Following GSTC accreditation standards and criteria, Vireo certifies tourism industry and destinations worldwide (Vireo Guidelines for the GSTC Certification process). Vireo does not maintain a separate standard, instead certify against GSTC criteria and South Tyrol Standard (www.suedtirol.info).

2.2.4. Green Step: Green Step operates on its own GSTC recognized standard in their assessment and certification program which provides certification to tourism destinations and businesses across Canada. This sustainable tourism standard is used to evaluate performance in numerous key categories including management, socio-economic aspects, nature and culture, and environment. Green Step uses an extensive 117 criteria-based questions to do assessment and review on evidence of these themes (www.greenstep.ca).

2.2.5. Biosphere: Biosphere Responsible Tourism, based in New Zealand, operates in over eighty countries worldwide and is part of the TSCA (www.tourismsustainability.org). It follows the recommendations of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED,1992) and certifies against a standard formerly recognized by GSTC. The certification is focused on the 2030 Agenda, SDGs and their 169 targets across four themes of responsible tourism policy, social and economic development, preservation and improvement of cultural heritage, and environmental conservation (Biosphere Destination Community, 2023).Following a thorough assessment and ongoing improvement process, destinations can achieve one of three certification levels: Biosphere Certified, Gold, or Platinum (www.biospheretourism.com).

2.2.6. TourCert: TourCert is a German based innovation and certification company established in 2009. It certifies businesses, cultural and natural attractions and tourism destinations. It primarily operates in Germany, Costa Rica, and Peru through its set of standard criteria. It is also part of the TSCA (www.tourismsustainability.org) and uses a standard formerly recognized by GSTC (www.tourcert.org). The criteria of TourCert are distributed across seven themes including strategy and planning, development of sustainable offers, economic stability, local empowerment, nature and landscape conservation, cultural management, and quality of life (TourCert Destination Criteria, 2022; Implementing rules for the certification of destinations, 2022).

2.3. Certified Destinations

There are 272 destinations awarded sustainability certifications globally awarded by the six global certification bodies, as of May 2025 (see Table

3). Europe leads the scenario with nearly 70% of certified destinations, indicating strong implementation of sustainability in practice. North America follows with 12%, while Asia, Australia, and South America with around 6%, signaling that destination certification is still in its early stages to accept destination certification as a quality hallmark. Notably, in Africa, no destination has received certification from any of the global certification schemes, highlighting a significant gap and potential area for future growth. In Europe, the concentration of certified destinations is found to be in Slovenia, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. This distribution underscores that certification schemes are presently more established in the Western World, while holding considerable promises for expansion into emerging tourism regions (see Table 3 and Figures 1 & 2).

Table 3: Number of destinations certified
(continent & certifier wise; as of May 2025)

| Continent | Certification body | | | | | | Continent total |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|------------|----------|-------|-----------------|
| | Biosphere | Earth-check | Green Destinations | Green Step | TourCert | Vireo | |
| Asia | 0 | 1 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 19 |
| Australia | 0 | 5 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 |
| Europe | 50 | 9 | 107 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 189 |
| North America | 12 | 3 | 5 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 32 |
| South America | 3 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 16 |
| Certifier Total | 65 | 18 | 149 | 11 | 5 | 24 | |

Continent wise Certified Destinations

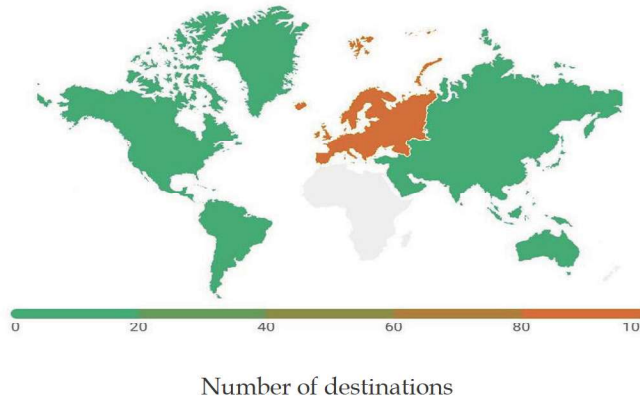


Figure 1: Continent wise certified destinations (As of May 2025)
(Source: Websites of the six certification bodies)

As seen in Figure 3, among the six global certification bodies that adheres to standards complying with GSTC criteria, Green Destinations leads sustainability certification with 55% market share, followed by Biosphere

with a 24% market share. These two certifiers together account for about 80% of certified destinations worldwide. Vireo (9%), Earthcheck (7%), Green Step (4%), and TourCert (2%), are also active, restricted to specific geographical regions. The dominance of Green Destinations can be explained by its unique focus on destination certification while other organizations focus on the certification of tourism industry stakeholders, as illustrated in Table 3 and Figure 3.

**Continentwise Sustainability Certified Destinations
(as of May 2025)**



Figure 2

**Sustainability Certified Destinations by Global certifiers
(as of May 2025)**



Figure 3

(Source: Websites of the six certification bodies)

The diversity of certification bodies and increasing number of sustainability certification standards in the tourism segment has created significant challenges for destination management authorities in identifying and adopting the most suitable certification framework. Without a clear understanding of the differences, overlaps, and unique weights of each certification framework, destinations risk investing resources in programs that may not fully align with their specific sustainability goals and local contexts. This lack of clarity deters effective decision-making and limits the potential impact of sustainable tourism initiatives. Therefore, there is a critical need for a comprehensive comparative analysis of existing certification programs to guide destinations in selecting the most appropriate certification pathway based on their individual priorities and performance levels. Therefore, this study aims to:

1. To provide destination authorities with a comprehensive understanding of the various certification frameworks.
2. Evaluate and compare the criteria and indicators used by these certifiers in assessing sustainability across destinations.
3. To support destinations in performing self-assessments and selecting the most suitable certification program that aligns with their sustainability goals and initiatives.

3. Methodology of the study

This study examines five major global destination certification bodies that utilize their own publicly available sustainability standards. This includes two GSTC accredited certifiers (Earthcheck and Green Destinations); one certifier using GSTC recognized standard (Green Step); and two certifiers part of the TSCA (Biosphere and TourCert). The sixth prominent certifier, Vireo, has been excluded from this analysis as it does not maintain its own global sustainability standard but instead certifies destinations based on the GSTC criteria and the regional South Tyrol standard.

To analyze the collected data, the study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The process involved several key steps: engaging in multiple readings of the data while making detailed notes, transforming these notes into emergent themes, identifying relationships between the themes and clustering them accordingly, and finally, writing up the findings in a coherent narrative form (Nautiyal et al., 2025). This research conducts a comparative analysis of major destination certification standards by evaluating how the various criteria align with the GSTC destination standard criteria. Different standards assign varied weightage for their criteria and emphasize specific sub themes of the GSTC criteria. Therefore, the study will help destinations to have a self-assessment across the multiple certification standards, streamline necessary documentation and choose a certification body.

The GSTC standard covering triple bottom line dimensions of sustainability was developed through a comprehensive analysis of more than sixty certification schemes, 4500 criteria and remarks from 2000 industry stakeholders (Bricker and Schultz, 2015). The current version of the standard was adopted on December 6, 2019, marking a substantial revision of the original version introduced in 2013 (GSTC Destination Criteria, 2019). The revised destination criteria include four major sections, ten sub-sections, and thirty-eight criteria which incorporates the ISEAL Code of Good Practices (GSTC Destination Criteria, 2019). The four sections and ten sub-sections of GSTC standard forms the base for the comparison used in this study and has been given in the Figure 4.

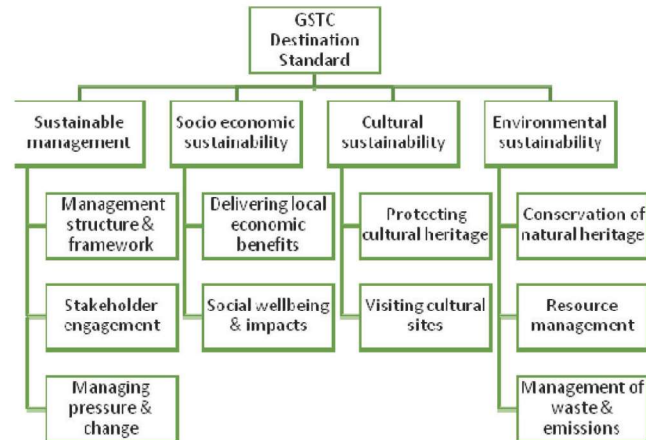


Figure 4: GSTC Destination criteria (Version 2.0, 2019)

The study compares each criterion of the GSTC Destination Standard with those of the five selected certification bodies. A scoring system was applied as follows: for each full criterion that aligns with a GSTC criterion, a weightage of 1 was assigned. If the alignment was at the sub-criterion level, a score of 0.5 was given. In cases where a particular GSTC criterion was addressed more than once by the destination standard, the first occurrence received a weightage of 1, while each subsequent repetition was assigned a reduced score of 0.3. The data analysis, along with graphical representation, was carried out using the data visualization tool, Infogram.

4. Analysis of the standards of the certification bodies

The study has analyzed GSTC destination standards criteria comprehensively against the criteria of the five certification bodies. The analysis includes four overarching thematic areas of the GSTC—sustainable management, socioeconomic impacts, cultural impacts, and environmental impacts—providing a detailed evaluation of points of convergence, divergence, and potential gaps across these different systems.

4.1. Section A: Sustainable management: This section of GSTC standard comprises a total of eleven criteria, focused on the overall management of the destination. This emphasizes the integration and effective implementation of sustainability principles within destination governance and administrative practices (Figure 5).

Among certifying organizations, Green Step and Earthcheck are predominant in sustainable management. Green Step leads in destination management, visitor engagement, and visitor number analysis while Earthcheck and TourCert focus on general sustainability criteria. Earthcheck

standard assigns maximum weightages for all criteria as destination benchmarking is a major component of their certification. Therefore, destinations with a strong sustainable management structure can opt for Earthcheck certification. Green Destinations is more active in strategy, action planning, monitoring and reporting while Biosphere shows noteworthy involvement in destination management. Earthcheck and Biosphere give priority for local enterprises and residents yet provide relatively limited attention for tourists or visitors. Consequently, tourism destinations which lack comprehensive visitor data and feedback can choose Earthcheck or Biosphere for their certification. However, the sustainability of a tourism destination depends upon visitor satisfaction, making it challenging for destinations to sustain progress without addressing tourist needs. The final subsection of sustainable management theme highlights indicators of contemporary relevance including climate change mitigation, managing pandemics, natural disasters and hazards, wars, terrorism, and over tourism. Accordingly, all certifying bodies have accorded significant importance to this section in their frameworks.

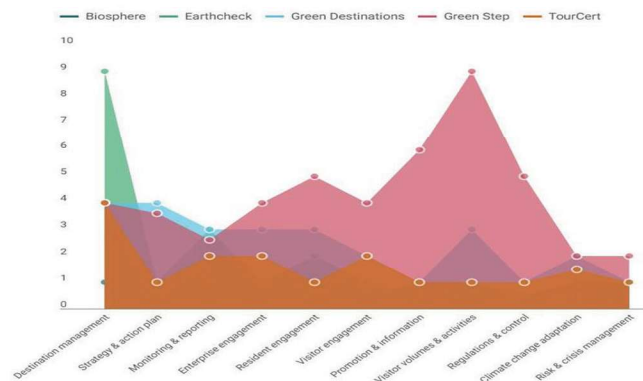


Figure 5: Section A: Sustainable Management

4.2. Section B: Socioeconomic sustainability: Social and economic indicators are vital in the prolonged progress of tourism development in any destination. This section evaluates the performance of the destination across eight criteria. All standards have given due weightage to economic impacts as they represent one of the most measurable and prioritized aspects of destination management (Figure6). The data indicates that TourCert, Green Step, and Green Destinations are the primary drivers of socio-economic sustainability initiatives. TourCert demonstrates the strongest overall performance across various categories, particularly in areas including economic contribution, decent work and career development, and supporting entrepreneurs. Green Step leads with increased focus on areas including safety and security, access for all, and economic contribution. Green Destinations demonstrates

a strong presence with their emphasis on areas including property and user rights, preventing exploitation, and supporting community. Conversely, Earthcheck is an underperformer in this theme as it does not address three core criteria which are fundamental in modern tourism management including property and user rights, safety and security, and access for all.

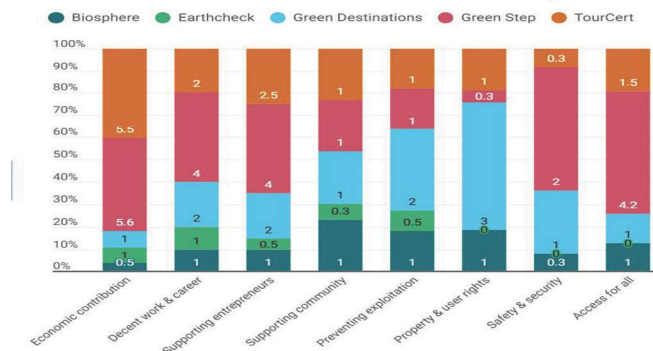


Figure 6: Section B: Socio economic sustainability

4.3. Section C: Cultural sustainability: This theme significant for most destinations, encompasses a total of seven criteria outlined in the GSTC standard, as illustrated in Figure 7. All certifiers demonstrate relatively a more balanced performance across the areas including traditional access, tangible and intangible heritage. Green Destinations has incorporated specific assessment indicators for all the criteria in this section. This comprehensive coverage likely contributes to its popularity among cultural destinations and heritage sites seeking certification. Biosphere and TourCert have emphasized a strong cultural sustainability focus on visitor management and cultural heritage protection. Nevertheless, both Earthcheck and Gren Step have overlooked cultural sustainability as they have largely neglected the key aspects of cultural sustainability, thereby weakening the overall certification process. Moreover, cultural artefacts, intellectual property protection, and site interpretation have been understated in these certification schemes. This highlights a notable gap in current certification practices and points to substantial opportunities for improvement in how cultural sustainability is addressed and communicated at heritage destinations. This reveals an impending gap and suggests a pressing need for enhanced strategies to better interpret and contextualize cultural sites for visitors.

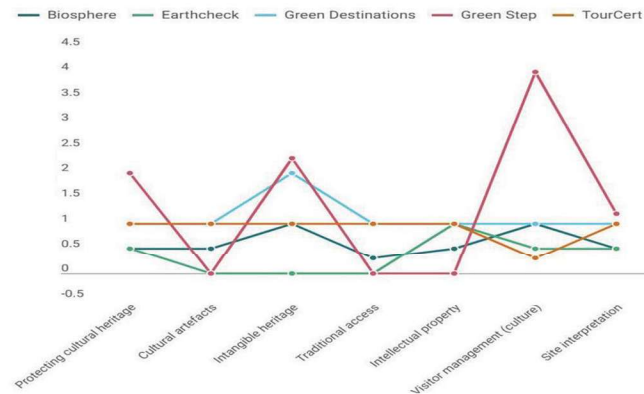


Figure 7: Section C: Cultural sustainability

4.4. Section D: Environmental sustainability: The final section of the GSTC criteria focuses on key issues and how destinations address them to promote environmentally responsible management. This section covers crucial themes that are essential for aligning with the SDGs, and includes twelve core criteria, as illustrated in Figure 8. Green Step stands out as the leader in environmental sustainability with comprehensive coverage across key areas including solid waste management, greenhouse gases and climate change, energy conservation, water stewardship, and wastewater management. Destinations with strong performance across environmental criteria can choose Green Step as certifier. Other certifiers including Green Destinations (low impact transportation, visitor management), Earthcheck (wildlife interaction), and TourCert (sensitive environments) also have given focus on different environmental criteria. The Biosphere, meanwhile, exhibits consistent but modest performance across all indicators.

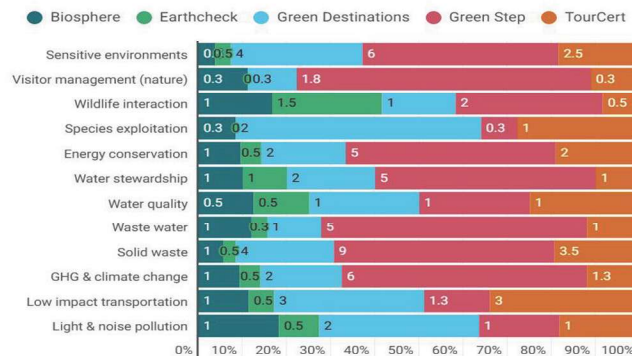


Figure 8: Section D: Environmental sustainability

From the detailed analysis, it can be inferred that, in general, all certifiers have placed due emphasis to major criteria and indicators across the four

themes. However, the data analysis reveals significant variation in how certification bodies interpret and implement sustainability standards. While some tend to focus on specific areas, others adopt a more comprehensive and balanced approach aligning with GSTC standard. The overall performance of each certification body is presented in Figure 9.

Green Destinations maintains relatively balanced reporting across all themes. This well-rounded performance against comprehensive GSTC alignment makes it a satisfactory option for all categories of destinations and has contributed to achieving more than 50% market acceptance for Green Destinations among the major certifiers. Green Step excels in sustainable management and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, it shows the most pronounced variation across the four themes, underperforming in cultural sustainability dimension. Similarly, Earthcheck exhibits its strongest focus on sustainable management while it has overlooked many criteria in cultural sustainability. This pattern suggests that both Green Step and Earthcheck heavily prioritize management systems and environmental conservation, with relatively less attention given to the preservation of cultural heritage. TourCert and Biosphere demonstrate modest performance across themes indicating a balanced but less intensive approach to sustainability standards.



Figure 9: Overall comparative analysis of the five certification standards

This comparative study is significant as it evaluates how leading certification bodies have structured their destination standards in alignment with the criteria set by the GSTC. The research offers valuable insights for destinations seeking to conduct a self-assessment of the various criteria, sections, and themes they have effectively implemented. It enables them to select a certification body based on the areas where they perform strongly, while also identifying opportunities for improvement.

The study highlights the need for self-assessment as an instrument for tourism destinations for identifying sustainability gaps and improve documentation process. By leveraging on this, destinations can achieve certification and progress toward the implementation of UNSDGs, resulting in regenerative, responsible, and resilient tourism. This study serves as a decision-making tool for destination managers, offering insights into selecting the most appropriate certification body based on thematic alignment, regional relevance, and operational capacity. The prospects of this research seem relevant as it serves as a working document for destinations, empowering them to make informed decisions towards a sustainable policy framework and action planning.

5. Conclusion

Sustainability certification is a strategic pathway for destinations aiming to balance tourism development with ecological integrity, social equity, and cultural preservation. It enhances destination credibility and supports responsible tourism development, resilience, and regenerative practices. By adopting globally recognized standards, destinations can ensure long-term viability, stakeholder engagement, and meaningful contributions to the SDGs certification.

This study offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of global sustainability certification standards, benchmarked against the GSTC Criteria. While all certification bodies align with GSTC to varying degrees, Green Destinations demonstrates the most balanced performance across the four major themes: sustainable management, socioeconomic sustainability, cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability. The research underscores the importance of self-assessment for destinations seeking certification, enabling them to identify strengths, address gaps, and align with SDGs. By analysing five major global certification bodies, the research provides a clear comparative overview of their criteria, indicators, and alignment with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) benchmarks. This understanding will support destination management in achieving sustainable tourism goals, the diversity and complexity of these frameworks present significant challenges in decision-making. The criteria-wise evaluation of the certification bodies offers destination authorities a

valuable reference tool to evaluate their own sustainability performance across key dimensions and to identify the most appropriate certification program that aligns with their specific objectives and local contexts.

With increasing regulatory scrutiny, such as the EU Green Claims Directive—and the emergence of alliances like TSCA and Travalyst, the certification landscape is evolving toward greater transparency, collaboration, and visitor trust. In this context, the implications of this study are twofold: at the policy level, it supports informed decision-making and strategic planning by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of their sustainability efforts. At the practical level, it reassures greater transparency and harmonization among certification bodies, eventually contributing to the advancement of sustainable tourism practices globally.

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