

11 October 2011

An Open Letter to our Sustainable Travel and Tourism Colleagues,

The GSTC Council is a multi-stakeholder global initiative where constructive dialog and debate is welcomed and encouraged. As an organization committed to the positive progress of sustainable travel and tourism, we want to ensure the circulation of accurate information. This letter is intended to address the ongoing misinformation and/or misunderstandings that have been circulated throughout our community about the GSTC Criteria, its function, and its purpose.

The GSTC is an open organization and we strive to meet this commitment in every way. We hope this response will put to rest past concerns and misunderstandings so we can all focus our energy towards the important work that lies ahead.

Responsiveness

We are disappointed and perplexed by continued characterizations that paint our attempts to address criticisms of our organization and work as non-responsive. Not only has the GSTC provided written and public responses to criticism, our staff have taken additional steps to engage directly through in-person dialogue with our most vocal critics.

In a recent [blog post](#) on September 27, 2011 one of our most vocal critics, Harold Goodwin states:

“Back in July 2009 Justin Francis and I wrote an open letter to the GSTC with some specific questions and there was public support for those questions from 80 industry professionals. The GSTC has not yet replied to that letter. It is surely time that they did.”

We are perplexed because we did indeed respond. GSTC Executive Director, Erika Harms, met with Mr. Goodwin in November 2009 at World Travel Mart in London as he states [on his website](#):

“In response to our open letter, we met with Erika Harms (Executive Director of the Tourism Sustainability Council at the United Nations Foundation [now the GSTC]) at the World Travel Market in London, November 2009. We agreed to disagree on how matters should proceed regarding the criteria. She declined our invitation to post a reply addressing our concerns on [responsibletravel.com](#), but did respond in an open letter [here](#).”

As noted above, the GSTC also responded in-kind with an Open Letter for the sake of public dialogue. You can read the letter [here](#).

In addition to these efforts, Ms. Harms and our Technical Director, Amos Bien, reached out personally to many of those who signed the original letter.

In February 2011, Mr. Bien also met with Justin Francis and Trudi Pearce of ResponsibleTravel.com, an online tour operator, to discuss their concerns. Although they disagreed on some key issues, there was agreement on the areas of transparency, minimum standards, dissemination of best practices, and the need for client engagement.

In May, Mr. Francis issued a [message](#) from his Twitter account: “GSTC refuse to respond to 100’s who signed our petition for response to concerns on flawed global criteria.” Despite the fact that there were only 83 signatories and many of them were Responsible Tourism employees or associates (as can be seen [here](#)), GSTC responded in good faith, hoping to provide renewed clarification, through a series of blog posts that address all of the issues raised. You can view the first of the GSTC blog series [here](#).

The GSTC Criteria: A Framework, not a Certification

The GSTC Criteria were developed to create a common language about sustainable tourism to serve as a basis for further dialogue by tourism practitioners and academics, government agencies and consumers. The GSTC Criteria are not a certification.

Mr. Goodwin, in his latest blog [post](#), states,

“The GSTC appears not even to be concerned about the importance of prioritising the list, let alone identifying and addressing local priorities.”

In this, he is absolutely correct. The GSTC Criteria are a foundation, to be adapted by local and regional entities, governments and certification bodies. It would be irresponsible and inappropriate to set priorities for local issues at a global level.

The GSTC Criteria are the baseline for a holistic approach to sustainable tourism. The idea of “weighting” was not considered because it would be contrary to the GSTC’s approach of sustainability, which entwines social, environmental and economic interests, and should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a whole systems approach.

It is the right and responsibility of the local and regional authorities or programs to decide the importance of each element of sustainable tourism as necessary. To argue impacts should be prioritized at a global level while also conceding that challenges to the impacts of tourism are unique by location, are incompatible ideas.

The GSTC Criteria provide a starting point, not an end point. We have and will continue to encourage local and regional certification bodies to adopt and adapt GSTC-recognized standards in a complete and appropriate manner. We expect each user of the GSTC Criteria to adapt them to local conditions and industry sector - whether large hotels or community-owned micro-businesses. The Criteria are not “one size fits all”; rather they are the *minimum*, not the maximum that should be applied worldwide.

Words AND Actions

The GSTC Criteria is not a certification program and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council has never intended to provide direct certification of tourism entities. As such, no benchmarks or performance requirements have been attached to the Criteria or sanctioned by the Council. However, a series of guidance documents have been provided for those interested in exploring how to measure their operations against the Criteria.

Again, in Mr. Goodwin's September 2011 post he quotes our organization, saying,

"...the GSTC Criteria tell us, 'what should be done, not how to do it or whether the goal has been achieved,'" continuing that the Criteria do not provide adequate practical measurement.

It would be helpful and more genuine if he had included the full quote in context,

"The criteria indicate what should be done, not how to do it or whether the goal has been achieved. **The indicators in this document are recommendations about ways of measuring compliance with the criteria.**"

The [GSTC Indicators](#) have been in existence nearly as long as the first version of the GSTC Criteria and provide a series of suggested ways to measure the impact and outcomes of the GSTC Criteria. View the full version (80 pages) [here](#) or the abbreviated version (14 pages) [here](#).

The v2 GSTC Criteria Public Comment Period

The first version of the Criteria has been available for two years. A number of businesses, certification programs, and destinations of all sizes have adopted the Criteria. It is now time to see what adjustments need to be made in order for them to optimally function. We have made concerted efforts to reach out to all networks to get diversified feedback. The review process is part of ISEAL guidance, which the GSTC aspires to follow. However, we do need to correct another error reported in Mr. Goodwin's post. . He states,

"The consultation is only about the wording of the 37 criteria and there is no opportunity to comment on the weighting of the various criteria, their relevance to local priorities or their fee structure."

In fact, there is open comment space at the end of each section and at the end of the full survey to make general comments of whatever nature is deemed appropriate. In addition, all comments that are made will be made public as Mr. Goodwin indicates. We also recognized a shortfall in our current survey offering. We had not posted the comments made over the past two years that have led to the v2 Criteria currently open for public comment. We had planned to provide all comments, both for v1 and v2, at the conclusion of the current process. However, we acknowledge the wisdom of posting the v1 comments prior to the close of the current survey period. We have made the documents available on the GSTC website in the [Resource Center](#).

A Summary of Responses

While we believe we have adequately and thoroughly addressed all of the issues raised, we would like to do so here to prevent any further misunderstanding.

Issue #1: *No process of certifying hotels can produce a sustainable tourism experience because of the range of activities undertaken on holiday and the impacts of different types of consumer. The tourist is not merely a consumer, they too have impacts.*

GSTC Answer: Mr. Goodwin himself defended the role of certifications during his [recent presentation](#) at the *Coalition Internationale pour un Tourisme Responsable* in Paris June 1st 2011, so we hope he is able to answer his own concerns on this matter.

But as many in the field recognize, the scope of certification programs is limited to the activities of the certified business. Certifications play a role in instilling the process; in helping staff and other personnel become familiar with the practical implications of certification; provide clarity and confidence for consumers and directly lead to improved practices and real outcomes.

It would be impossible to say that a certification program can control every aspect of tourism given the industry's incredibly long and deep value chain. In some cases, the certification criteria require codes of conduct for tourists as well as suppliers – but even these steps are limited. Progress towards truly sustainable tourism is incremental, where each additional measure is more valuable than no progress at all.

Issue #2: *The criteria are no more than a 'wish list' – there is no measure and the outcomes are not reportable.*

GSTC Answer: There are currently 130 sustainable tourism certifications worldwide that clearly dictate, for the region they operate in, what to do and how to measure it. It is the sole agreement between the certification program and the business on how to manage the measurement and reporting of compliance. The GSTC Criteria serve only as a baseline to inform the certification program of best global practice.

Issue #3: *The certification process is opaque. The customer does not know what has been achieved and cannot take any action about failures even if they did.*

GSTC Answer: As mentioned in our [blog post](#) from June 20, 2011, consumers have the most powerful voice of all stakeholders. They vote with their wallets and their words. Specifically, Travelocity [reported](#) that consumers preferred sustainable options and the company saw increased customer satisfaction when booking sustainable properties. Consumers have the power to audit businesses on their promises and report to a global audience on their successes and failures through a number of social media outlets, personal blogs, and travel-related sites specifically designed for this purpose such as Trip Advisor. There are many ways consumers can make a difference and we continue to engage our partners to create additional mechanisms by which we can make it easier for consumers to be the first line of feedback. In the end, if a

consumer is dissatisfied she will express her dissatisfaction clearly through her wallet and will choose more sustainable providers next time.

Issue #4: *The criteria are many and varied and not ranked. Furthermore they fundamentally fail to recognize that what might be a significant issue in one destination might be less important in another and there is no apparent effort within the scheme to overcome this weakness.*

GSTC Answer: Once again, the Criteria are designed as guidelines, not as a certification. A certification program is entitled to develop its own rules and regulations because they are most familiar with what is applicable for their destination and what it not. It is not the role of the GSTC Criteria to dictate to a program what to do, but rather provide guidelines so that they can undertake the process themselves. The GSTC Indicators provide a catalogue of suggestions on how to measure the impact of the Criteria that can also be adapted to meet the specific needs of the destination.

Issue #5: *There is no evidence that sustainable tourism certification is effective (or the best way) to increase the market share of businesses that adopt it.*

GSTC Answer: Sustainable tourism certification is a relatively new practice, and certainly one that has grown quickly in recent years. A [study by CESD/TIES](#) showed that building consumer demand takes time. In the early stages of industry-wide certification, businesses tend to led efforts toward certification without consumer demand influence. Once certification becomes mainstream within the B2B market, consumer demand follows between 8-15 years later. This has also been the experience of programs such as the Marine Stewardship Council and Forestry Stewardship Council. While many businesses adopted certification as a means of corporate social responsibility, the increasing trend of environmentally and socially conscious travelers provides an interesting business case for sustainable tourism. Those who could be considered “die-hard sustainable travelers” certainly remain a niche. However, growing awareness of the availability of sustainable tourism products has seen an uptick in interest in adopting sustainable practices by some of the world’s largest companies. With increased awareness comes a growing need for more information and a less confusing, scattered marketplace to encourage accelerated consumer demand.

We will quote what others have said:

“Consumer skepticism towards ‘greenwashing,’ combined with disagreement over what green travel means, have created a need to establish standards for environmentally friendly, sustainable travel – and trusted certifications. Over 40 percent of respondents looked for third-party certification to verify that a travel supplier is truly “environmentally friendly.” And 91.6 percent of respondents said that a hotel’s environmental rating is an influence.” - CMIGreen Traveler Report 2010-11.

We can all hope that “sustainable tourism” is replaced with just “tourism” someday, but until then aware consumers will be interested in knowing who is actually being responsible about their practices.

We look forward to working in direct collaboration with any individual or organization interested in building a strong foundation for sustainable travel and tourism. We do hope that if there are further questions or concerns that we can engage with each other in a spirit of goodwill to discuss solutions, rather than create an atmosphere of dissent and division.

There is much work to do and we look forward to working with all stakeholders to accomplish our common mission.

With best regards,



Erika Harms
Executive Director, GSTC



Dr. Kelly Bricker
GSTC Board Chair

