

Sustainable Marine Tourismⁱ

1. Key points

- Pacific tourism depends on healthy marine ecosystems for aesthetic appeal and for the ecosystem services that support human occupation.
- Many of the coastal wetlands and reefs of the Pacific Ocean valued by tourists are also significant carbon sinks. Their carbon uptake and storage can be increased by restoring degraded ecosystems.
- Tourism is forecasted to grow in the coming years and the new traveller is increasingly demanding environmentally responsible experiences and healthy environments. Sustainable tourism requires informed, integrated management.

2. Challenges and opportunities (*appetite for integrated ocean governance*)

- Coastal habitats and iconic Pacific species (many of whose populations are depleted) are major tourism draws but are under threat from land-use change, invasive species, unsustainable harvest, and climate change.
- Pacific island countries face challenges in planning for sustainable development of infrastructure as well as sea and land uses related to tourism.
- Engaging the private sector and tourism stakeholders meaningfully in sustainable marine tourism can be challenging due to capacity constraints, amongst other things. However, this also presents an opportunity for building public-private partnerships.
- Sustainability is still a new concept in the Pacific's tourism industry. Investment in awareness and education at all levels in understanding the value of the ocean and its ocean resources is fundamental to making progress in achieving sustainable marine tourism.
- Sector specific research on the benefits and impacts of marine tourism is needed to inform sector planning and targeted action.
- Measuring the sustainability of the Pacific's tourism sector needs to go beyond the economic impacts it generates.
- Most Pacific island countries do not have focused policies/strategies to develop and manage marine tourism. Interventions to address these gaps at regional and national level are essential.



3. How issues link to key policies (SDG14, FPO, Samoa Pathway, 2050 Regional Strategy, etc.)

SDG14 Life Below Water

- SDG1 and 8: Tourism is an economic driver in the Pacific Islands region.
- SDG6, 9, 11: The increased number of visitors and linked coastal development requires sound planningⁱⁱ for clean freshwater and sanitation systems and resilient infrastructure.
- SDG 7, 12, 14, 15; The tourism industry requires responsible consumption and production practices, including clean energy and avoidance of degradation of life on land and in water, for continued availability of the features that attract tourists.

SAMOA Pathway

- Marine tourism is a large component of the Pacific's tourism offering. Increased commitment to plan and develop this niche segment is needed to realize sustainable tourism.

Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape

- Clarity around stakeholder roles and responsibilities in a dynamic cross-cutting sector like tourism is needed in ensuring their commitment and meaningful engagement in the sustainable management of coastal and marine tourism.

4. Background and other reference materials

1. Approximately half of all international tourists travel to coastal areas, globally.

Coastal tourism and recreation contribute to economic growth by creating job opportunities and providing an important source of income and foreign exchange earnings. In Small Island Developing States (SIDS), tourism can account for more than 25% of the national GDPⁱⁱⁱ and up to 80% in Pacific countries like Cook Islands. Tourism drives other local economies as well: the total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP is three times greater than its direct contribution.^{iv} Over 3 million visitors to the Pacific was recorded in 2018 and it is forecasted to increase by 3% annually.^v

2. The ecosystems and environments that attract tourists are under threat.

An estimated 20% of global mangroves have been lost, 19% of coral reefs have disappeared, and 29% of seagrass habitat has vanished. The remainder is under threat. Coastal habitat loss is between 0.5% and 3% of their global area per year, resulting in 0.15–1.02 billion metric tons of CO₂ released annually (equivalent to burning 112 billion gallons of gasoline, more than used by all commercial airlines each year).^{vi} Preservation of coastal habitats is globally valuable as a climate change mitigation measure and to support tourism economies. Coastal habitat preservation in the Pacific islands requires integrated ocean management and a “ridge-to-reef” approach due to the close links between island and sea.

3. Tourism infrastructure and practices vary in environmental impact.

Tourists alter the environments that they visit through their travel practices, energy consumption, requirements for infrastructure and development of tourist facilities, and even the sunscreen they wear, which can be toxic to e.g. corals.^{vii} Creating a culture of sustainable tourism that is led by Pacific values and the reality of long-term dependence on marine and coastal environments can generate value for Pacific branded tourism.

4. Environmental sustainability is an increasingly important factor in tourist’s decisions.

Tourists are able to accurately perceive comparative environmental health or degradation, and this perception is directly related to the likelihood of returning for another visit or recommending the site to others.^{viii,ix} Today’s tourists are increasingly seeking sound practices and healthy environments, with ecotourism growing as a fraction of total tourism by over 10% annually.

5. Environmentally sound tourism is a key opportunity for Pacific islands.

As in many developing nations, ready access to unique environmental features is a major draw. Coral reefs attract 350 million people and drive over USD 30 billion each year in tourism revenue globally.^x In Palau, the lifetime value of a live shark is USD 1.9 million for dive tourism. Globally, about 600,000 people spend over USD 300 million annually to watch sharks, supporting 10,000 jobs worldwide.^x

6. Pacific species and heritage offer unique tourism value.

The Pacific Ocean is home to over half of the world's whale and dolphin species. Whale-watching is a multi-million-dollar Pacific industry, with further potential. In Indonesia, manta rays support over USD 10 million annually in dive expenditure from just 11 dive sites.^x

7. Pacific underwater cultural heritage is largely undeveloped for tourism.

There are over 4,000 heritage sites in the Pacific, many accessible to snorkelers and divers.^{xi}

ⁱ This brief was compiled by SPTO with inputs from relevant organisations and experts

ⁱⁱ UNEP 2009. [Sustainable coastal tourism: an integrated planning and management approach.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ UNWTO, Secretariat of Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (2012): [Destination Wet Lands: supporting sustainable tourism.](#)

^{iv} World Travel and Tourism Council. 2016. [Travel & Tourism: Economic Impact 2015 Asia Pacific.](#)

^v South Pacific Tourism Organisations, [2018 Annual Tourism Arrival Report](#)

^{vi} Spalding et al. 2016. [Atlas of Ocean Wealth.](#) The Nature Conservancy

^{vii} Downs et al. 2015. [Toxicological effects of the sunscreen UV filter, oxybenzone...](#) Arch Environ Contam Toxicol 70:265–288

^{viii} Schuhmann P. 2011. [Tourist perceptions of beach cleanliness in Barbados: implications for return visitation.](#) Etudes Caribbéennes 2011:5251

^{ix} Sadat & Chang. 2016. [The Impact of Environmental Quality of Revisiting Intention.](#) J Qual Assur Hospit Tour 17:209–223

^x Spalding et al. 2016. [Atlas of Ocean Wealth.](#) The Nature Conservancy

^{xi} UNESCO 2010. [Underwater Cultural Heritage in Oceania.](#) 111 p