



 Imagining an open
future for payments

An ecosystem approach to accelerating sustainable tourism



More than four years after the COVID-19 pandemic brought travel to a standstill, international tourism is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2024. This is a welcome development for countries and communities that rely on tourist spending; it is also an opportunity to holistically address social and environmental challenges such as overcrowding, greenhouse gas emissions, and ecological deterioration. Governments around the world are increasingly focused on climate and sustainability issues, but some may have focused too narrowly on green claims and greenwashing as they seek to protect consumers from potentially misleading information about their consumption choices. For countries whose economies rely heavily on tourism, reducing environmental impact will require an ecosystem approach. This paper provides a taxonomy of tools that policymakers and regulators at all levels have used to promote sustainability in the travel and tourism space. While this taxonomy is not comprehensive, it can serve as a tool for public and private sector participants who must contend with the distinct social and economic circumstances of their region, country, or community.

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Introduction

More than four years since the COVID-19 pandemic brought travel to a standstill, international tourism is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2024 (UN Tourism, 2024). This is a welcome development for countries and communities around the world that rely on tourist spending to support their local economy and jobs. At the same time, increasing tourist flows can contribute to social and environmental challenges such as overcrowding, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and ecological deterioration. In many cases, the travel and tourism (T&T) sector and the communities that are dependent on it are also particularly vulnerable to climate and environmental impacts, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity, which threaten the viability of many tourist destinations.

Governments around the world are increasingly focused on climate and sustainability issues, yet there has been limited attention on addressing the unique challenges and attributes of T&T. One important area that has been rapidly evolving is a set of policy frameworks emerging around green claims and greenwashing. For example, in March 2024, the European Parliament adopted a new Green Claims Directive that requires companies to substantiate the claims that they make about the environmental or sustainability characteristics of their products. Some airlines and travel merchants have already begun to face lawsuits and consumer protection actions over the environmental claims in their marketing (Plucinska et al., 2023). It is unsurprising that travel providers have been at the forefront of the debate and the legal landscape around green claims since existing technology and fuel sources for transportation over long distances is generally carbon-intensive and currently lacks scalable greener alternatives. This is a reality that travel providers are working hard to address to meet pressures from policymakers, customers, and other stakeholders.

At the same time, travelers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of their travel. In our 2023 paper, [Accelerating sustainable tourism](#), we found that 29 percent of those surveyed have sought to minimize their travel carbon footprint over the past two years and 34 percent plan to take less carbon-intensive modes of transport when traveling in the next year (Fujimatsu et al., 2023). This matches the overall trend in recent years of more consumers feeling directly affected by climate change and expressing greater environmental consciousness in their purchasing choices (GlobeScan, 2023).

Tackling the key challenges

The transition to a low-carbon economy represents a near-Herculean challenge that cuts across sectors, geographies, and levels of government. It involves a set of complex and overlapping challenges. While these are not unique to T&T, the sector is an excellent example of the barriers that governments, the private sector, and other stakeholders must overcome.

Table 1: Key challenges to sustainable T&T

Challenge	Climate change and net-zero transition	Implications for T&T
Decarbonizing hard-to-abate sectors	While many industries have substitutes that are available (sometimes at near cost parity), others are very difficult to decarbonize due to the fundamental technologies involved.	T&T, particularly internationally, depends heavily on carbon-intensive forms of transportation like aviation. There are few alternates (e.g., rail links between destinations) or technological solutions (e.g., sustainable aviation fuel at scale).
Addressing the tragedy of the commons	Unlike many other pollutants, GHG emissions are dispersed in the atmosphere, affecting the climate globally rather than a single locale. Absent law or targeted requirements, there may be limited incentive for any individual actor to curb their emissions.	Individual travel destinations reliant on tourist spending are incentivized to continue drawing travelers, even if this creates externalities like GHG emissions that go beyond the locality.
Shifting consumer behavior	The behavior and decisions of millions of individual consumers, each with their own preferences, interests, and cultural context, ultimately translate into societal consumption patterns.	Hundreds of millions of tourists travel internationally each year, and despite growing interest to act sustainably, individual travel behaviors may conflict with environmental objectives.
Ensuring resilience of local environments and communities	Countless communities face climate-driven heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, floods, and other disasters, creating an economic and human toll that will continue to grow.	Many travel destinations are facing climate impacts such as wildfires and rising heat, making some tourists rethink their plans and raising questions for the communities that rely on historical travel patterns (World Economic Forum, 2023).
Driving continued economic growth and job creation	The need to carefully navigate a transition of energy systems and infrastructure in a manner that balances competing economic needs and desired outcomes.	Mitigating environmental and climate harm by limiting tourist flows is undesirable given the reliance of numerous jobs and local economies on continued tourist spending.
Intersection of climate, nature, and other environmental issues	Climate change and nature degradation / biodiversity loss are increasingly being recognized as “two sides of the same coin” (Klenske, 2021).	Travel destinations are in many cases dependent on local features such as unique ecosystems or wildlife, which may be imperiled by a changing climate.

As pressure grows to combat perceived greenwashing, government engagement will continue to play an important role within the T&T sector.¹ However, reducing environmental impact in a meaningful way will require an ecosystem approach, especially for countries whose economies rely heavily on T&T. This approach should focus on enabling public and private sector participants to innovate and provide lower-impact options for consumers who are increasingly interested in reducing the environmental footprint of their travel choices. Moreover, an ecosystem approach should build on the insight at the heart of green claims policies: Consumers need to have an accurate, credible understanding of the sustainability characteristics of the products and services they choose.

Improving access to credible information requires close collaboration between the public and private sectors, enabling consumers to embrace more sustainable travel options if desired (Fujimatsu et al., 2023). This could include efforts to incentivize sustainable consumption and behavior through education, awareness, pricing, and other mechanisms. It might also include support for the private sector's efforts to increase efficiency and adopt resilient, low-carbon technologies across the T&T value chain.

1. A recent analysis from Net Zero Climate and the University of Oxford found that regulations on green claims and product standards are in place in nine of the G20 countries, with seven more in progress (Borges Ramos Dias et al., 2023).

What lessons can the T&T sector take from digital payments?

Visa's journey to foster digital payments across the world offers some insights into how policy recommendations can be implemented to facilitate more sustainable T&T. In certain ways, parallel challenges are facing both sectors, including coordinating policies across different levels of government, managing a global ecosystem of businesses of varying sizes and across different industries, and relying on infrastructure (e.g., electricity, access to the internet, and telecommunications) to enable growth and innovation.

Some of the ways in which Visa has navigated these challenges include:



forming public-private partnerships to build infrastructure (e.g., POS terminals, QR readers) and programs that enable businesses of all sizes to thrive;



engaging with policymakers to eliminate barriers to entry for small businesses and support the growth of e-commerce;



supporting governments in their adoption of digital payments as they become role models for policy implementation; and



providing data and insights to governments on their existing payments ecosystem to help them identify areas for improvement and growth.

Many of these efforts could be applied to the implementation of sustainable T&T policies. Underlying infrastructure that increases access to technology, such as the internet or mobile phones, can provide tourists with more information about transportation options and ways that they can avoid the most popular times to visit attractions.

Appropriate and targeted policies at the national level could encourage more sustainable behavior while curbing or eliminating harmful practices such as greenwashing or unfettered use of carbon intensive modes of transportation. Government bodies can serve as role models by requiring their staff to use more sustainable travel options, for example by incentivizing public transportation. Merchants that implement sustainable practices could benefit from tax incentives or subsidies that make their businesses more resilient to environmental shocks and help build a thriving tourism industry.

In Visa's experience, impactful policy levers take an ecosystem approach and rely on public-private cooperation, creating a positive feedback loop.

From protecting to empowering travelers

Consumer decision-making across diverse interests, tastes, cultural backgrounds, and other attributes contributes to broader T&T patterns and therefore sustainability outcomes (Fujimatsu et al., 2023). The challenge that emerges is threefold. First, do truly sustainable travel options that are desirable, cost-competitive, and attainable exist? Second, is credible, accurate information about the sustainability impact of different travel options available in a way that travelers can easily access and interpret? Third, will such information alter the purchasing and travel decisions that consumers make in a way that reduces the “say-do” gap?²

Recent efforts to combat greenwashing, such as the European Union (EU)’s Green Claims Directive and litigation, have focused on a single element: ensuring that consumers are not presented with inaccurate or misleading information. Such measures have generally been agnostic to the products themselves; greenwashing is undesirable whether describing a cleaning product, mutual fund, or airline ticket.

While consumer protection is an important policy objective, its application to sustainability claims can produce an interesting and often troubling result. In some cases, the companies facing pushback for their advertising or product descriptions are the very companies that are the most committed to improving their environmental and climate impact. This can produce the phenomenon that has been termed “greenhushing”—in which companies avoid public commentary on sustainability topics out of concern about the pitfalls they could face. In turn, punitive actions, controversy, and greenhushing could contribute to what GlobeScan (2023) has characterized as “hints of an increasing sense of disempowerment” on the part of consumers, creating a negative feedback loop in which other companies are then disincentivized to invest in sustainability efforts.

2. The “say-do-gap” refers to the discrepancy between what people say they would like to do or intend to do, and what they actually do in practice.

Policy taxonomy: An ecosystem approach

There is a diverse spectrum of policies that have the potential to drive sustainable outcomes while protecting the many economic and social benefits of T&T. Interventions range from broader sustainability goals, like achieving net-zero carbon emissions, to those specific to T&T, such as enhancing the sustainability of a particular destination.

As the challenges above highlight, there is no single policy that can improve the environmental footprint of T&T while accounting for the unique needs and characteristics of destination communities—just as there is no single policy measure or intervention that can decisively mitigate climate change.

In practice, policy initiatives will be driven by different levels of government depending on the issue. Though many countries have a Ministry of Tourism or similar entity, the sustainability dimensions of T&T implicate a much wider range of government stakeholders at different levels. For example, decarbonization is likely to be primarily driven by actions at national and multilateral levels, while trying to drive more sustainable practices like reducing overcrowding may be better addressed at the sub-national level. Policy coordination across the public and private sectors is also critical. Louise Twinning-Ward, Senior Private Sector Specialist at the World Bank, provides a clear illustration of this necessity: “Waste separation at the hotel makes no sense,” she observes, “if there is no waste separation at the municipal collection point.”

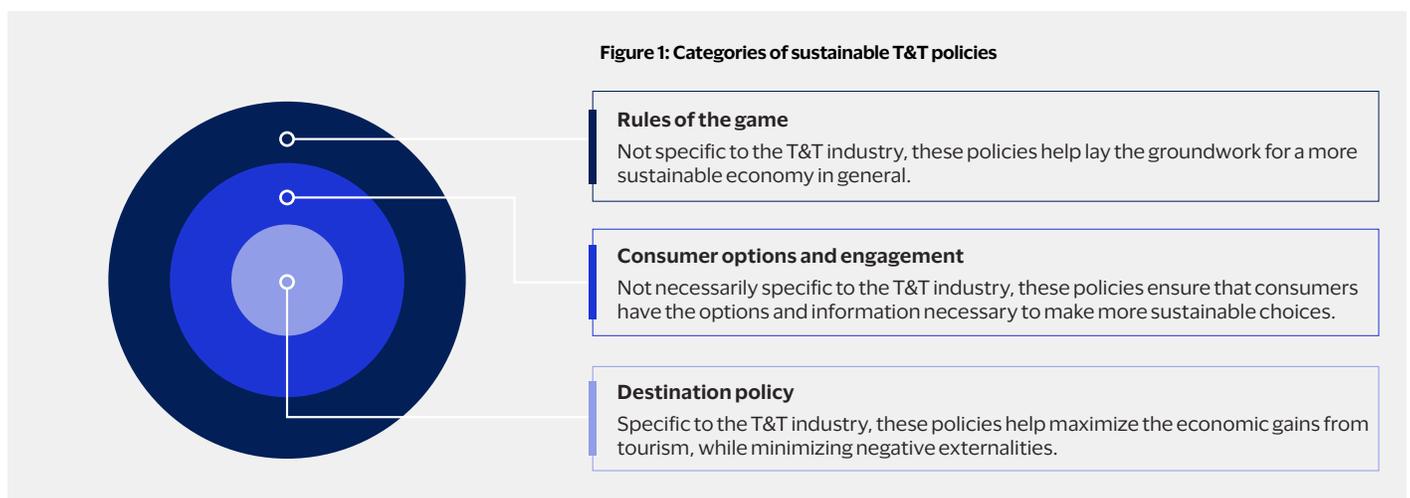


Table 2 outlines different policy levers that policymakers at all levels have implemented or are contemplating. The table divides policies into three categories: rules of the game, consumer options and engagement, and destination policy. While this taxonomy is not comprehensive, it can serve as a tool for public and private sector players who must contend with the distinct social and economic circumstances of their region, country, or community.

Table 2: Taxonomy of sustainable T&T policies

Category	Policy measures	Examples	Challenges
<p>Rules of the game: Rules of the game primarily include governance at the national and multinational level. Policies in this category are focused on aligning a minimum set of credible and consistent standards and flow down to other levels of governments and stakeholders. Policies in this category are not typically specific to T&T, but impact the sector nonetheless. For example, a country's implementation of robust energy efficiency standards for buildings may result in travelers being able to enjoy lodging options that consume less energy, without any change in their own decision-making.</p>			
Product and building requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fuel and energy efficiency standards Water efficiency standards Recyclability standards for consumer products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Japan: Fuel efficiency standards for passenger vehicles United Kingdom: Ban on some single-use plastics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May impose financial burden on consumers Can be costly to enforce
Resource restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land use restrictions (e.g., agriculture, logging) Other resource restrictions (e.g., bans on fracking, coal mining) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belize: Ban on oil extraction to protect coral reefs United States: Ban on logging in old-growth forests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May create reliance on imported goods Can be costly to enforce
Subsidies and tax credits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renewable energy subsidies Public transportation subsidies Biodiversity tax credits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malta: Free public transportation Costa Rica: Payments to conservationist farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subsidies and tax credits can impose costs on government
Standard-setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of legal definitions and thresholds Provision of green certifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Union: European Tourism Indicators System Sierra Leone: Certification for hotels following waste management guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without international alignment, may result in fragmentation across geographies
<p>Consumer options and engagement: Consumer options and engagement are policies and initiatives focused on aligning supply and demand towards more sustainable choices. For example, investing in green public infrastructure or running marketing campaigns for off-peak travel both create opportunities for tourists to participate in more sustainable behavior. These policies are not necessarily focused on the T&T sector, but they do provide nudges to consumers by trying to align supply and practice with consumers' desire to be more sustainable and support local economies.</p>			
Infrastructure investments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renewable energy infrastructure Sustainable mobility infrastructure Conservation efforts (e.g., national parks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baltic Region: Pledge to develop offshore wind infrastructure New York City: Contactless payments for public transit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infrastructure investments may entail up-front costs Robust energy and mobility infrastructure may take years to develop
Research and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financing of commercial R&D (e.g., climate technology) Financing of consumer research (e.g., trends in sustainability attitudes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Union: Horizon Europe program for energy and mobility research United States: Funding for solar panel recycling research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research programs may be expensive New technologies may not be easily implemented at scale

Communication and marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of travel off season and in low traffic areas Promotion of local attractions and businesses focused on sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iceland: Off-season travel campaign Barcelona: Sustainable Gastronomy Guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications campaigns may be expensive Consumers may not respond to marketing
Reporting and disclosures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data sharing initiatives Development of data sharing tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Union: Development of Tourism Data Space Slovenia: Portal for sustainable transport choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May require additional resources for companies Voluntary data-sharing programs may have limited uptake
<p>Destination policy: Destination policy is specific to T&T, aimed at maximizing the economic gains from tourism, while minimizing negative externalities. For example, limiting visitor numbers or applying visitor taxes that get redistributed to the community can have direct positive impacts on sustainability and local economic outcomes.</p>			
Government frameworks and development plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-term vision for coordinated development of sustainable practices for visitors, industry, communities, and the environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ASEAN: Framework on Sustainable Tourism Development in the post COVID-19 era 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires strong collaboration and coordination among stakeholders and levels of government
Visitor restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrictions on visitor numbers Temporary destination closures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> United States: Visitor limits for some National Parks Ecuador: Temporary closures for parts of Galapagos Islands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visitor restrictions directly reduce short-term economic gains May be costly to enforce
Visitor fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrival taxes and destination fees Congestion zone fees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stockholm: Establishment of congestion zones Venice: Tourist tax targeting day-trippers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced demand may impact local economies Increased prices may exclude lower-income travelers

In practice, the policies outlined above can take many shapes. For example, Costa Rica set the rules of the game by providing direct payments to landowners who help preserve biodiversity on their property, which in turn has helped drive tourism to the country's scenic Osa Peninsula (Langenheim, 2017). Cities like London and New York ensure consumers have access to sustainable transportation options by investing in robust mobility infrastructure, including contactless payments on public transit (Keyes & Levy, 2023). And historical sites like Venice, Italy set destination policy by charging day-trippers a fee to tackle overcrowding (Kelly & Dickinson, 2024).

However, the most effective policies are part of a broad, coordinated approach that spans across industries, geographies, and levels of government. For example, in February 2022, the European Commission published its Transition Pathway for Tourism, which aims to “achieve the green and digital transitions and long-term resilience of the sector.” The Pathway urges the tourism community to take steps in 27 areas, including improving sustainable mobility, investing in circularity (i.e., products and services that utilize local resources, reuse and regenerate

materials or products, etc.), and enhancing data sharing practices. Importantly, the Pathway recognizes that achieving a sustainable T&T industry requires “coordination between the local, regional, national and EU levels” and encourages “all groups and stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem to engage and play their part.” In December 2023, the European Commission launched a project entitled “Sustainable EU Tourism – Shaping the Future of Tomorrow,” which will take place through December 2025. The project aims to assist EU tourism destinations in their green transition, through initiatives such as a “peer-to-peer twinning mechanism for tourism destinations facing similar challenges” (European Commission, n.d.).

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Other regions have also started to adopt a coordinated approach to sustainable T&T. In January 2024, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched the Action Roadmap for Sustainable Tourism Development, which provides strategies and specific actions and activities governments can take to attain sustainability objectives within the regional tourism industry. The roadmap outlines five key priorities: sustainable economic growth, social inclusiveness, resource efficiency and environmental sustainability, cultural diversity and heritage protection, and resilience planning and adaptation (ASEAN, 2024). The ASEAN roadmap also recognizes the need for collaboration across industries and levels of government. One case study outlined in the roadmap is Indonesia’s Tourism Village Development Programme, which seeks to “promote unique cultural experiences for both domestic and foreign tourists to safeguard and promote local culture” through collaboration with local governments.

Conclusion

Although the policies highlighted in this paper are not exhaustive, they illustrate how nearly every level and body of government can work with the private sector to drive decarbonization and other sustainable outcomes while supporting the positive economic benefits of tourism. These measures may come with their own challenges or limitations, both practical and financial. But a core takeaway is that policy measures and interventions that sit upstream from T&T hold some of the greatest potential to reduce the environmental impact of T&T while sustaining its myriad positive economic and societal impacts.

Given the global, cross-cutting nature of T&T, policy coordination with the private sector is critical. In *Accelerating sustainable tourism*, we identified five opportunities for the public and private sectors to collaborate in order to support consumers in making more sustainable travel choices (Fujimatsu et al., 2023):

- Invest in robust, sustainable mobility infrastructure where it does not already exist.
- Ensure public transit systems are accessible and inclusive, particularly for out-of-town visitors.
- Help attractions and destination management organizations manage over-tourism.
- Take steps to develop a consistent framework for measuring trends in sustainability
- Overcome informational barriers to help close the say-do gap.

These recommendations were based on the finding that many consumers want to travel more sustainably, but may not do so because of information barriers, high costs, and other factors. As we outline above, the responsibility of making T&T more sustainable should not sit with consumers alone. While policy efforts to support consumers in shifting their travel choices are important, we recognize that policymakers can utilize a wider set of tools to improve the environmental footprint of T&T. By addressing sustainability and decarbonization at a whole-of-economy level—perhaps as part of a regional or national net-zero strategy—governments can create a level playing field for businesses, invest in large-scale initiatives or infrastructure that may be out of reach for a single tourist destination, and make it easier for consumers to make more sustainable decisions.

As governments and policymakers consider how to accelerate sustainable tourism in their jurisdiction, we hope this taxonomy serves as a useful guide for selecting applicable solutions and implementing an ecosystem approach.

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