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BLOG POST September 24th 2026

Sustainable blue tourism: From local initiatives to systemic change

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Reading time: 6 min

After the collapse triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, international tourism returned to its 2019 level in 2024, with nearly 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals recorded. In 2025, it surpassed that level by a wide margin, and despite the international crises that have affected the sector in recent months, tourism is expected to remain resilient in 2026. In coastal areas, which account for half of these tourist flows, this recovery has renewed pressure on ecosystems and communities that were already vulnerable. Yet the COVID crisis had fuelled strong ambitions for a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive tourism model. What does remain of that ambition today? After four years of work in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Western Indian Ocean, the Blue Tourism initiative, co-led by IDDRI, offers a nuanced assessment: local experiments are multiplying, but they are struggling to change the trajectory

of a sector that still lacks high-level governance and direction.

The COVID-19 crisis abruptly interrupted the continuous growth of international tourism. In 2019, more than 1.4 billion international tourists travelled around the world. In 2020, international arrivals fell by more than 70%. Four years later, the sector had already recovered most of the ground lost during the pandemic. Since then, the recovery has continued: a revival for a sector that contributes significantly to global economic growth, and a relief for many countries, workers and communities that depend, sometimes heavily, on tourism.

This recovery also marks the return of pressures that had been temporarily suspended and which, without a change in trajectory, are expected to intensify in the years ahead. This is particularly true in coastal areas, already facing multiple pressures, including demographic growth, biodiversity loss, the impacts of climate change, competition over land and natural resources, as well as growing pressures on housing and infrastructure. As these pressures return, a broader question emerge: four years on, to what extent, has the ambition to “Build Back Better” translated into lasting changes?

Territories experimenting with different models

One conclusion nevertheless stands out: it is primarily at the local level that the clearest signs of a willingness to change have emerged in recent years. In some territories, pressure is coming first and foremost from residents themselves. Overtourism has brought to the fore an issue that had long remained secondary in tourism policies: the capacity of a territory to accommodate visitors without degrading the living conditions of its residents. This growing opposition is pushing some destinations to experiment with new tools: regulating short-term rentals, limiting certain tourist flows, managing access to natural areas, regulating cruise activity, or introducing specific taxes. Elsewhere, the goal is not necessarily to reduce tourism, but rather to enable local communities to play a greater role in shaping tourism and to capture a larger share of the benefits it generates.

The pilot experiences carried out as part of the Blue Tourism Initiative highlight several key factors behind successful local sustainable tourism initiatives. First, they show that the transition towards sustainability cannot be achieved through a single measure but depends on the ability of stakeholders to better coordinate their actions at the territorial level. This requires moving beyond sectoral approaches and bringing together tourism-related issues with ecosystem protection, spatial planning, economic activities and local livelihoods.

These experiences also underline the importance of involving communities not merely as beneficiaries or consulted stakeholders, but as genuine governance partners, able to participate in the design, implementation and monitoring of initiatives. This dynamic requires coordination and capacity-building mechanisms, and more broadly depends on better knowledge-sharing between residents, tourism professionals, researchers and public authorities, so that decisions can adapt to environmental, economic and social changes.

Finally, the projects demonstrate that multiplying local initiatives is not enough to achieve systemic change. A territorial project can demonstrate that another trajectory is possible, but it cannot, on its own, change the economic, legal or institutional conditions that shape the sector. This is where national policies need to step in to create the enabling conditions for local stakeholders and to ensure that by the links between local practices and the policy, planning and investment decisions are harmonized.

Good practices do not make a policy

On paper, however, traditional national strategies based on growth targets have often been replaced, or complemented, by approaches that integrate environmental and social considerations. Yet translating these ambitions into action remains limited.

One reason is the limited political weight of the institutions responsible for driving these agendas (such as environment and tourism ministries), which is most often attributed to their institutional positioning, leaving them subordinate to key economic priorities; their constrained budgets for supporting the transition; and the lack of coordination between public authorities responsible for policies connected to the sector, including housing, development and infrastructure. This prevents a systemic approach to the challenges at hand. Reports from across the world, including the Caribbean and the Pacific, converge on this point and, as the OECD recently argued, call for “better coordination of multi-level governance to align national and local action and embed approaches across government”.

Limited international cooperation

More broadly, in countries experiencing low growth and/or a high degree of dependence on tourism activities, the sector’s contribution to the vitality of the broader economic fabric often encourages public authorities to prioritize short-term economic returns at the expense of environmental and social objectives. This also partly explains governments’ reluctance to consider the sector as an area for international cooperation and to adopt coordinated strategies. Yet tourism is a globalized activity that, by its very nature, requires a certain degree of international coordination: tourists cross borders, cruise companies change ports of call, digital platforms organise tourist flows, and major hotel groups operate across multiple countries.

Despite dedicated intergovernmental forums at both global and regional levels, cooperation between countries remains largely limited to broad commitments and technical documents. Yet, developing transnational policies, for example at the regional level, could help prevent the adverse effects of competition between States and destinations–which most often results in sustainability requirements being given insufficient consideration–and address shared challenges such as climate change and security.

Similarly, regulating certain tourism activities only makes sense if countries act in concert. Banning or imposing limits on large cruise ships in certain ports, for instance, will not improve ecosystem health or the quality of life of coastal populations if those same ships are simply redirected to neighbouring countries. Without coordination between states, pressures are merely displaced rather than durably addressed. It is in this context that the Council of the European Union recently reiterated “the importance of effective multi-level governance in the Union, involving the Commission, Member States and, where appropriate, regional and local authorities, destination management organizations (DMOs), the tourism industry and other relevant actors”.

In recent years, there has therefore been a persistent gap between the blue tourism initiatives emerging on the ground and the transformations needed at the sectoral level. Although the challenges are often numerous and successes remain fragile, local experiences show that it is possible to better reconcile tourism activity, ecosystem protection and the interests of local communities. But scaling up does not simply mean replicating these “good practices”: it requires changing the rules of the game. To this end, stronger public leadership is needed to better align policies, coordinate across different levels of governance, and strengthen cooperation between states when tourism flows and their impacts transcend national borders. This does not mean that public authorities should bear the responsibility for the transition alone. Businesses make many of the investment and operational decisions that shape the sector’s impacts and are therefore essential actors of change. However, to transform their practices, they need clear direction, coherent and predictable rules, incentives that make the transition compatible with their economic objectives, and public policies that encourage and support their efforts. In the absence of such leadership, exogenous factors, such as health and security crises or natural disasters, may instead force the sector to change course abruptly and under pressure, at the cost of economic and social disruptions that are far more difficult to manage.

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