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Sustainable development

Sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [76/201](#) on sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America, provides an update on the advances made since the release of the previous report on the subject ([A/76/217](#)), issued in July 2021.

* [A/78/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [76/201](#) on sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America, adopted in December 2021, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its seventy-eighth session an action-oriented report on the implementation of the resolution, including concrete recommendations to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in this regard, in the Central American countries. As the specialized agency of the United Nations system responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) prepared the present report.

2. The report is based on, among other sources, the input received from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama in response to the request by UNWTO in early 2023 for updates on new developments and advances in sustainable tourism and sustainable development since the previous report ([A/76/217](#)), in order to monitor the implementation of resolution [76/201](#).

II. Responding to global sustainability challenges

3. As a result of the severe global economic downturn following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, compounded with weak economic growth, high inflation and rising oil prices, the tourism sector has been severely affected. Despite such challenges, major efforts have been undertaken by the Member States of the region to recover and strengthen a sector which represents an important source of employment, both formal and informal, and a key source of foreign exchange for several countries.

4. International tourism saw better than expected results in 2022, backed by a strong accumulated demand after the lifting or relaxation of COVID-19-related travel restrictions in many countries, with more than 900 million tourists travelling internationally in 2022. The latest UNWTO data show that the sector's swift recovery has continued into 2023, with an estimated 235 million tourists travelling internationally in the first quarter of the year, more than double the number in the same period in 2022, with Central America reaching about 98 per cent of 2019 levels of international visitors and with several destinations reporting extraordinary growth in arrivals in the first quarter of 2023 compared with the first quarter of 2019, including in the Dominican Republic (an increase of 11 per cent), El Salvador (an increase of 26 per cent), Guatemala and Honduras (an increase of 13 per cent).¹

5. Voluntary national reviews are essential for assessing the advances and challenges encountered in delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and for setting the agenda for renewed action. From the Central American region, Costa Rica (2017 and 2020), El Salvador (2017 and 2022), Guatemala (2019 and 2021), Honduras (2017 and 2020), and Panama (2017 and 2020) have submitted voluntary national reviews twice since 2017, and Nicaragua presented its first review in 2021. As seen from their voluntary national reviews, all those countries have continued their unwavering commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving its goals and targets.

6. In order to maximize a mutually beneficial relationship between tourism and biodiversity conservation, UNWTO has prepared a review of the integration of biodiversity in national tourism policies, assessing the level of integration of biodiversity values in 80 national tourism policies, including those of Costa Rica,

¹ UNWTO, *World Tourism Barometer*, vol. 21, issue 2 (May 2023).

El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama. The aim of the review is to understand where, how and why biodiversity issues are referenced and, where references are made, whether they address and prioritize the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Summary findings reveal that most policies (95 per cent) define nature as a primary tourism offer, reinforcing the message that tourism brings value to biodiversity conservation and could play a stronger role in protecting biodiversity and effectively supporting the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

7. In December 2022, UNWTO partnered with the World Travel and Tourism Council and the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance to launch, at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Nature Positive Tourism Partnership, a new collaboration bringing together the public and private sectors in a shared nature-positive vision for travel and tourism to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, supporting and inspiring governments, businesses and civil society to implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Signatories to the vision commit to adopting a nature-positive approach to tourism by integrating biodiversity safeguards; by reducing carbon emissions, the impact of pollution and the unsustainable use of resources; and by protecting and restoring nature and its wildlife.

8. Following the launch of the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism at the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, over 800 tourism stakeholders from 90 countries, including Honduras and Panama, have subscribed to the Declaration, committing to halving emissions by 2030 and achieving net zero emissions by 2050 by developing and implementing climate action plans aligned with five pathways, namely measuring, decarbonizing, regenerating, collaborating and financing.

9. The *Baseline Report on Climate Action in Tourism* was released in December 2022 and presented the results of the global survey on climate action in tourism, which collected inputs from more than 1,000 stakeholders, including from El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama. In March 2023, *Climate Action in the Tourism Sector – an Overview of Methodologies and Tools to Measure Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, which was developed with support from the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection of Germany, was released in collaboration with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

10. The Global Tourism Plastics Initiative, launched in 2020 and co-led by UNWTO and the United Nations Environment Programme in collaboration with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, is based on commitments to eliminate problematic and unnecessary plastic packaging and items; to integrate reuse models; and to collaborate and invest to increase recycled content in plastic products and recycling and composting rates. To date, the initiative has 154 signatories (accommodation providers, supporting organizations, suppliers, tour operators, online platforms and destinations) from across 57 countries and is supporting the readiness of tourism stakeholders for the international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, which is currently being negotiated.

11. The Global Roadmap for Food Waste Reduction in the Tourism Sector was developed with support from the One Planet multi-partner trust fund for Sustainable Development Goal 12 and released for public consultation in December 2022, during the seventh UNWTO World Forum on Gastronomy Tourism, following the implementation of an online training series on sustainable food management,² which

² Available at <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/programmes/sustainable-tourism/food-waste-reduction/training-series>.

involved over 300 stakeholders, and the release of an online repository that includes 15 tools and resources. The final version of the Roadmap integrating the inputs from the consultation process was due to be released in the third quarter of 2023.

12. In April 2023, UNWTO welcomed the Sustainable Tourism Observatory of Tlaxcala State, Mexico, to its International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories, bringing the total number of member observatories to 37, including one in Guatemala, committed to the continuous improvement of the sustainability and resilience of tourism at the destination level through systematic, timely and regular monitoring of the economic, environmental and social impacts of tourism. To support the work of the Network, regular webinars have been held on key issue areas.

13. UNWTO, in partnership with the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the International Labour Organization, is leading the way to a new United Nations measurement standard on the sustainability of tourism. An example of moving beyond gross domestic product (GDP),³ the statistical framework for measuring the sustainability of tourism supports the production of data that are more comparable and credible and that integrate economic, social and environmental aspects to guide decisions and policy. Under the UNWTO Committee on Statistics and the Tourism Satellite Account, the multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder Expert Group on Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism held its third meeting in December 2022, agreeing on a road map for the finalization of the framework and its presentation, for endorsement, to the Statistical Commission in 2024. Twenty-five countries, including Costa Rica, and subnational destinations have implemented a pilot of the framework.⁴

III. Efforts and initiatives to promote sustainable tourism and sustainable development in the Central American Region

14. Tourism offers significant opportunities as a tool for development and supports community and economic development but was also among the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with businesses and livelihoods severely affected by the sharp and sudden downturn in the economy, especially in tourism-dependent countries and with regard to women and youth, for whom tourism is a major source of employment and income.

A. Fostering economic development through tourism in the Central American region

15. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an estimated loss of \$2.6 trillion in international tourism revenues. Revenues dropped by 62 per cent in 2020, 59 per cent in 2021 and 36 per cent in 2022 compared with those of 2019, in real terms, with the loss in the Americas estimated at \$560 billion (22 per cent of the total global loss).⁵

16. The year 2022 saw a strong rebound in tourism spending, leading to the recovery of pre-pandemic levels of income across many destinations. International tourism receipts recovered the \$1 trillion mark in 2022, growing 50 per cent in real terms

³ “Our Common Agenda policy brief 4: valuing what counts: framework to progress beyond gross domestic product” (United Nations publication, 2023).

⁴ See UNWTO, *Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism – Learning from Pilots* (Madrid, 2022) and UNWTO, *Experiences from Pilot Studies in Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism: a Synopsis for Policy Makers* (2020).

⁵ UNWTO, *World Tourism Barometer*, vol. 21, issue 2, May 2023.

compared with 2021, and reaching 64 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. The recovery was supported by the increase in average spending per trip, owing to longer periods of stay, travellers' willingness to spend more at their destination, and higher travel costs, partly caused by inflation. Central American destinations reporting international tourism receipts close to or above pre-pandemic levels in 2022 include El Salvador (an increase of 42.8 per cent) with tourism receipts of \$1,864 million, Nicaragua (an increase of 15.6 per cent) with \$596 million, and Honduras (close to pre-pandemic levels), with \$540 million.⁶

17. As a result of the measures implemented by the Government of Nicaragua in support of the tourism sector during the pandemic, in 2022 tourist arrival numbers reached 63 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. The recovery also saw an increase in average daily spending and the generation of foreign exchange to levels higher than those before the pandemic. Women are key players in the sector, contributing 51.8 per cent of the workforce, and more than 90 per cent of the tourism industry relies on micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises.

B. Catalytic role of tourism in advancing sustainability policy at the national level

18. Sustained progress is being made in the Central American region in the development and implementation of policies at the national level to advance tourism as a key driver of a sustainable and green recovery.

19. Costa Rica is one of the front runners in the implementation of environmental and sustainable development policies, having signed a series of environmental and social commitments at the national and international levels, and joined organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.⁷ Most of the mechanisms that Costa Rica has, which respond to the country's commitment to contribute to the global goals of conservation and sustainable development, are directly or indirectly related to the tourism sector, including mechanisms created prior to 2021 such as the nationally determined contribution to the global response to climate change, the national decarbonization plan, the national adaptation policy and plan of action, and the territorial economic strategy.

20. The national tourism plan of Costa Rica for the period 2022–2027, issued in 2022, presents a tourism development model based on the three pillars of sustainability, innovation and inclusiveness. The plan's objectives are to promote resilient tourism by making sustainable use of tourism and cultural heritage; to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the communities of the various regions of the country; and to maintain tourism as the main driver of the country's economy. Efforts across a range of areas will contribute to sustainable development through a series of programmes to encourage tourism companies and local actors to reinforce sustainable practices in the industry and in communities.

21. The mission of the new national tourism plan of El Salvador 2030 is to strengthen the position of the country as a competitive tourism destination in which all areas of sustainability are integrated through the effective management of tourism supply and demand, by strengthening the institutional framework of the sector and by promoting socioeconomic development through the generation of employment and

⁶ UNWTO *World Tourism Barometer Statistical Annex*, vol. 21, issue 2, May 2023.

⁷ Francisco Ernesto Préstamo Gil and Jorge Zúñiga Gamboa, "Analysis of policies and strategies implemented in Costa Rica for sustainable development, in the monetary, production and consumption sectors" *Universidad y Sociedad* (University and Society) vol. 12, no. 1 (February 2020).

income to improve the living conditions and quality of life of the population, by ensuring the value and conservation of the historical, natural and cultural heritage of the destination and by providing a satisfactory experience for tourists.

22. The coordinated inter-agency work carried out in El Salvador between government agencies responsible for the economy, public works, natural resources, public security, health, governance and territorial development, the General Directorate of Migration and Immigration, and the Development Bank of El Salvador has made it possible to bring development to tourism destinations and their inhabitants. Such developments include improvements to and extensions of access roads, wastewater treatment, access to new technologies, national environmental management plans, including with relation to garbage elimination, tourist destinations and surfing tournaments, as well as associated capacity-building and the development of livelihoods related to tourism.

23. The national policy for the development of sustainable tourism of Guatemala 2012–2022 is in the final phase of being updated through a participatory approach. For example, axis two, on sustainable tourism development, is under review, emphasizing the strategic objective of making sustainability the focus of national tourism development. A new strategic axis, disaster risk management for resilient tourism development, is being added, comprising five lines of action, namely strengthening knowledge of disaster risk in the tourism sector; disaster preparedness and business continuity of the sector; governance for sustainable, resilient and adapted tourism development in Guatemala; preparing for effective and resilient disaster recovery in the tourism sector; and disaster risk reduction and value generation in the tourism sector through the promotion of resilient investments and comprehensive and intersectoral actions.

24. The master plan for sustainable tourism of Guatemala for the period 2015–2025 comprises eight axes, including the modernization of institutional structures of the sector at the public and private levels in order to lead coordinated and effective tourism development. Under axis 2 of the master plan, in line with the national policy for the development of sustainable tourism, the importance and challenges are considered regarding phasing in the application of the criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, as well as adherence to the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism.

25. In 2022, the Honduran Institute of Tourism established a tourism policy that encourages the establishment of destination management organizations across 11 multi-destination territories. The approach is modelled on UNWTO guidelines for sustainable and inclusive tourism development. The policy is aimed at strengthening the alliance between the public sector, private sector, local communities and academia for the holistic management and sustainable development of tourism destinations in four strategic areas, namely quality and competitiveness; tourism statistics; management of natural, cultural and historical heritage; and marketing and commercialization.

26. Nicaragua develops and promotes sustainable, responsible, inclusive and accessible tourism for all. Tourism is a key element, as part of the creative economy, of the national plan to combat poverty and for human development 2022–2026. The national tourism policy continues to promote the sustainable development of the sector, strengthening the potential of Nicaragua as a tourism destination, effectively managing policies, strategies, programmes and projects in complementarity with and through shared responsibility among the sector's main stakeholders, to contribute to the reduction of poverty and the improvement of the quality of life of the population.

27. The master plan for sustainable tourism of Panama for the period 2020–2025, recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) as an example of innovation and sustainability, led to the reactivation of the country's tourism, conservation and research strategy. The strategy highlights the three fundamental pillars of the country's heritage, namely cultural heritage (multifaceted culture); green heritage (extraordinary biodiversity); and blue heritage (wonders of the ocean).

28. Panama is developing a model of sustainable tourism development that includes continuous management of the responsible use of forest and marine environments for tourism purposes, focusing on the preservation and regeneration of natural heritage and on improving the quality of life of rural communities without affecting the environment and mitigating the effect of climate change. The model has been recognized internationally owing to the empowerment of local communities, leading to the country being chosen as the best global destination at the Newsweek Future of Travel Awards 2021.

C. Tourism as a vital contributor to economic and social development and to poverty reduction

29. The COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts globally, including in El Salvador. The country's Government, however, swiftly implemented measures related to liquidity, biosafety, infrastructure, and market information and promotion. Action plans were put in place to support the recovery of the sector by using the time of crisis as an opportunity for improvement and by transforming the country into a safe tourist destination, and indicators were set to measure progress in that regard. According to data consolidated by the Salvadoran Corporation of Tourism, in 2022, 2.5 million international visitors were welcomed to the country, contributing to tourism expenditure of over \$2.6 billion. The expenditure constituted an 8.28 per cent contribution to GDP up until the third quarter of 2022.

30. Tourism is a key source of income and hard currency for Costa Rica. Before the pandemic, the sector contributed about 5 per cent of total GDP and was a significant employment generator. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 struck a significant blow to the industry, primarily owing to border closures. Recovery has been observed since the end of 2020, thanks to the reopening of borders and progress in vaccination. Earnings from tourism were more than \$3.9 billion in 2019, plummeting to \$1.3 billion in 2020, recovering slightly to \$1.7 billion in 2021,⁸ and then significantly increasing to \$3.1 billion in 2022.

31. Tourism is one of the key economic sectors in Guatemala, ranking fourth in terms of dollar income.⁹ The country was significantly affected by the pandemic: in 2020, the contribution of tourism to the total economy dropped by approximately 50 per cent, with the contribution of tourism to GDP decreasing from 5.8 per cent in 2019 to 2.8 per cent in 2020. International tourism receipts in 2019 were \$1,221 million, dropping significantly to \$327 million in 2020, slightly increasing to \$388 million in 2021 and then increasing substantially to \$987 million in 2022.¹⁰

32. The year 2022 marked the second consecutive year of growth for Honduras in the number of visitor arrivals, following a 71.9 per cent drop in 2020 owing to travel restrictions imposed as part of the global fight against COVID-19. Visitor arrivals in 2019 generated foreign exchange earnings of \$549 million in Honduras, which

⁸ UNWTO, *World Tourism Barometer*, March 2022 Issue.

⁹ España Exportación e Inversiones (Spanish Institute for Foreign Trade), "Estudio de mercado 2022: el mercado de turismo en Guatemala" (Market study 2022: the tourism market in Guatemala) (Guatemala City, 2022).

¹⁰ UNWTO, *World Tourism Barometer, Statistical Annex*, vol. 21, issue 2, May 2023.

dropped sharply to \$155 million in 2020.¹¹ The Honduran Institute of Tourism estimates that foreign exchange income during 2022 was \$548.9 million, reflecting 80.0 per cent growth compared with the income recorded during 2021.¹²

33. In Honduras, projects are promoted under a co-execution and co-investment model to enhance tourism attractions so that tourism provides real opportunities for the most vulnerable groups and supports poverty reduction. A process of strengthening community tourism associations has begun in Honduras for the empowerment of community members within tourism management, and a total of 32 groups of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and communities based in locations popular with tourists have been prioritized in that regard.

34. The tourism industry in Panama is primarily reliant on micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, which account for over 90 per cent of the sector.¹³ In 2022, the tourism sector reported a 141.9 per cent increase in international visitor arrivals compared with 2021. Tourism revenue reached \$4,720.6 million, reflecting a 105.1 per cent increase compared with the previous year, despite the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

35. Panama has prioritized the development of tourism experiences that focus on the “conscious traveller”, aligning with a global trend that demands authentic experiences that benefit local communities and their environment. Such experiences contribute to the conservation of natural and cultural resources under the tourism, conservation and research model, which involves local communities and aims to provide them with income from the expenditure of conscious travellers, thereby replacing unsustainable economic activities. For example, the tourism industry of Isla Cañas has transitioned from selling turtle eggs to generating sustainable income through guided tours for the observation of turtle nesting and hatching.

36. Following the presentation of the plan for 2023 of the Panama Tourism Authority, the National Tourism Council approved a resolution prioritizing the role of local communities as hosts of tourism experiences that allow travellers to connect with the country’s rich and diverse natural and cultural heritage.

37. In 2022, Nicaragua, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), carried out a project entitled “Entrepreneurship of Rural Women and Youth in Agrotourism”, which was aimed at improving the livelihoods of rural and Indigenous women, youth, and their communities, taking into account the impacts of COVID-19 and climate change, through sustainable agritourism initiatives that would contribute to an egalitarian recovery with cultural relevance by 2025. It benefited 20 agritourism initiatives in 19 communities in the departments of Boaco, Chontales, Jinotega and Matagalpa. Three products were developed: a project for implementing the agritourism farms programme in prioritized rural areas; capacity-building in four public institutions for training those involved in agritourism at the local level, with an emphasis on rural and Indigenous women and youth; and a communication campaign for the promotion and commercialization of rural tourist attractions in prioritized productive chains.

38. The project in Nicaragua was linked to the global “1,000 Digital Villages” initiative promoted by FAO in conjunction with UNWTO. The initiative encourages agritourism as an opportunity for rural households to diversify income sources by

¹¹ UNWTO, *World Tourism Barometer*, March 2022 issue.

¹² Honduran Institute of Tourism, “Ingreso de visitantes a Honduras (enero – marzo de 2023)” (Visitor arrivals in Honduras (January–March 2023)). Available at <https://iht.hn/es/turismo-receptor>.

¹³ Leda Peralta Quesada, *Tourism in Central America and the Dominican Republic in the face of digital technologies: challenges and opportunities for MSMEs* (Mexico City, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021).

promoting digital solutions to meet the needs of communities involved in rural tourism experiences.

39. Nicaragua continues to strengthen the skills of key players in the tourism sector, including officials and public servants who provide services to tourists and visitors, in order to improve tourism services and products. The focus is particularly important for micro-, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, which represent more than 90 per cent of the industry. In 2021, three exchanges of experiences were carried out to showcase successful cases, encouraging and promoting tourism entrepreneurship under the slogan “Sustainable Entrepreneurships in Nicaragua”. In addition, a total of 1,607 workshops were held in 2021 and 2022 on topics such as heritage knowledge and care, waste management, ecotourism and sports tourism, with 2,923 participants from the tourism sector.

D. Advances in environmental, cultural heritage and biodiversity protection initiatives, including community-based natural-resource management for tourism

40. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified pressures on biodiversity protection, heritage conservation, and the cultural and social fabric of communities, in particular of Indigenous and ethnic groups. There are many challenges that require strengthened efforts to steer countries in the region towards sustainable growth and development, individually and collectively, in both urban and rural settings.

41. El Salvador is refining specialized tourism destinations such as the Pacific Ring of Fire, Coffee Vital Experience and phase 2 of Surf City. The initiatives aim to capitalize on territorial potential and market demand by fostering local community development and preserving sociocultural heritage. They form part of a broader initiative encapsulated in the national tourism plan 2030, which promotes awareness among the public, communities and sector stakeholders of the need to lead the tourism sector along the path of sustainable development, promoting socioeconomic development that generates employment and income and improves the conditions and quality of life of the population, as well as ensuring the value and conservation of the historical, natural and cultural heritage of the destination, and a full and satisfactory life experience for tourists.

42. The Ministry of Tourism of El Salvador, the Salvadoran Corporation of Tourism and the Salvadoran Institute of Tourism, in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, are striving to eliminate single-use plastic products. The strategy includes the gradual incorporation of green criteria into public procurement and the prohibition of single-use plastic products in protected natural areas and recreational parks. The “Live Whale” (*Ballena Viva*) project has led to responsible whale watching being promoted in the Los Cóbano protected natural area and Ramsar Site. The initiative involves training tour operators and tourists on responsible tourism protocols and stipulating that all service providers adhere to the guidelines in the manual on responsible whale watching. The Ministry of Tourism has also joined the “Mission Ocean” campaign to conserve biodiversity and restore the marine ecosystem in the same area, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

43. The successful organization of international and Latin American surfing tournaments in 2022, as part of the Surf City strategy, continue to set a benchmark for the region in terms of biosafety and sustainable practices. The activities were organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, among

other stakeholders, and featured initiatives such as intensive cleaning campaigns in tourism hotspots and responsible solid waste disposal.

44. In 2023, El Salvador plans to embark on phase 2 of the Surf City strategy, funded by a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank. The phase will feature an environmental management component, with actions targeting climate change, territorial planning, beach certification programmes and solid waste management, among other things, all of which are expected to enhance tourism and the living conditions of local communities.

45. In late 2020, Honduras issued an executive decree declaring a state of marine emergency due to the rapid spread of stony coral tissue loss disease. The Honduran Institute of Tourism, as part of a committee overseeing compliance with the decree, has trained key actors to manage the disease in areas where cases had been reported.

46. In 2021, technical support was provided for drafting a public use plan for the protected Cayos Cochinos Archipelago natural marine monument in Honduras. The plan is aimed at ensuring sustainable tourism use and biodiversity conservation in the protected areas of the national system of protected areas of Honduras. A new public use plan is due to be issued for 2023 for other protected areas.

47. In Honduras, in 2022, as part of the measures for the growth of tourism products, specifically birdwatching, two bird tourism booklets were prepared for the destinations of Tela, Atlántida, and Lago de Yojoa. They were aimed at promoting the observation and conservation of birds, environmental education, and tourism culture in the general population, thereby improving people's knowledge of national birds and promoting natural and cultural heritage.

48. Nicaragua continues to encourage efforts between various public and private actors to promote the development of sustainable tourism in protected areas that contributes to the conservation and preservation of natural heritage and provides an economic alternative to families and communities that helps reduce poverty. Initiatives implemented include the incorporation of the Río Coco Geopark into the UNESCO Geoparks Network in 2020, which strengthened the country's tourism offering, highlighting the role of tourism in biodiversity conservation and historical and cultural heritage protection. Nicaragua is currently working with relevant stakeholders to nominate the Isla de Ometepe and Amerrique Mountains for inclusion in the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network.

49. In January 2021, the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved a law declaring and defining the Nicaraguan Caribbean biosphere reserve. The law promotes sustainable economic and human development, facilitating the conservation and development of the biodiversity of coastal marine systems, proper fishing gear usage, and the maintenance of sociocultural and ecological dynamics at the local, national and global level. The country also has regulations in place for whale watching.

50. On 19 May 2021, Nicaragua received the Tourism Excellence 2020 award for the "Viva Solentiname free of plastic" (*Viva Solentiname libre de plástico*) project, funded by the German Agency for International Cooperation and aimed at promoting environmental education in the protected area of the Solentiname Archipelago. Nicaragua also continues to promote various campaigns and strategies to raise awareness and provide environmental education to protect and conserve its natural environment, such as the "I love my clean municipality" (*Yo amo mi municipio limpio*) strategy, the "Together, we conserve our sea turtles" (*Junt@s conservamos nuestras tortugas marinas*) campaign, and the national reforestation campaign, "Green, I love you Green" (*Verde, que te quiero Verde*).

51. In October 2021, Nicaragua approved a law declaring and defining Corn Island, Little Corn Island and Blowing Rock as protected landscape and marine areas, in

recognition of their rich biodiversity and significant potential for tourism development. The law is aimed at conserving wetlands, managing fisheries, handling solid waste and preventing land-use changes for livestock activities. In April 2022, the municipal government of Corn Island approved an ordinance regulating the entry, use and commercialization of single-use plastic within the protected area. Under a progressive plan, which started in February 2023, the introduction of non-reusable plastic material (such as plastic bottles, plates, cups, cutlery and straws) will be reduced, thereby reducing environmental impact, protecting natural resources, and promoting environmentally friendly practices and sustainable tourism.

52. The Panama Tourism Authority, in partnership with the Ministry of Environment, launched the “1,000 km of Trails” project in January 2021, establishing land and marine trails. The project was launched on the Camino del Oleoducto, one of the most important trails in the country for its tourism, ecological and scientific value, located in the Soberanía National Park. The goal is to create collective governance spaces for developing working and training plans to help ensure the maintenance of the trails. The four-year project is aimed at conserving nature and diversifying rural economies through the development of the outdoor recreation industry and green tourism in protected areas. As well as covering routes and trails, the project will include areas closer to communities and private reserves.

53. In 2022, the Panama Tourism Authority inaugurated the first phase of the Caldera route in El Valle de Antón, consisting of 30 km of trails where local communities have been included as stakeholders in the route experience. Improvements are being made, in conjunction with the Ministry of Environment and other partners, for a total of 177 km of trails nationwide. The work will include appropriate adaptations in areas subject to erosion and the installation of benches in resting places, booths, a lookout point with a spectacular view, and 35 maps and interpretive signs that have been designed and printed on weather-resistant materials. The project is a good example of collaboration between various actors from the private sector, local authorities, surrounding communities and central Government.

54. In June 2021, the Panama Tourism Authority presented the “Indigenous Panama” (*Panamá Indígena*) initiative to the national coordinator of Indigenous Peoples. The initiative is a tourism circuit developed as part of the heritage routes proposed in the country’s master plan for sustainable tourism for the period 2020–2025 and aims to show the world view and traditions of seven Indigenous Peoples, who will share with visitors their respect for nature, their world view, gastronomy, dances and rituals.

55. In June 2021, Panama became the first country to achieve protection of 30 per cent of its marine area, in addition to having 33 per cent of its land area under protective status, thus positioning Panama as the new blue world leader, a distinction granted to countries that manage to achieve the “30 by 30” target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at the national level, and the country plans to continue increasing its percentage of protected area, thereby provides more opportunities for the strengthening and development of blue tourism, as corals are promoted as a tourist attraction. In May 2022, Panama became the first country in the region to establish the integral protection of coral reef systems, ecosystems and associated species at the level of national law.

56. Within the framework of the eighth “Our Ocean” conference, held in Panama, in March 2023, significant achievements were achieved in the country. For example, in June 2021, a national decree was signed that expanded the protected area of Banco Volcán from 14,201 to 93,391 km², encompassing four submarine mountain ranges, deep plains and geological formations linked to rich biodiversity. With the expansion, Panama now protects more than half of its maritime territory (54.33 per cent), thereby

supporting tourist services that rely on access and visibility of the diversity of fluvial and maritime resources.

57. The Panama Tourism Authority continues to implement its programme for tourist experiences in host communities, through which sustainable projects continue to be prioritized at the national level, allowing local communities to prepare their tourism offerings according to a market-ready model, providing training and infrastructure improvements to optimize the experience of visitors. The community tourism plan supports the “Beehive Plan” (*Plan Colmena*), which seeks to reduce the inequality gap in the country. Under the Plan, actions will be carried out in at least 10 communities across the country, supporting them in product development, business planning and customer service in order to strengthen the sustainable and participatory tourism sector locally, with the aim of diversifying their economies in the longer term.

58. Through a cooperation project, Guatemala seeks to exchange knowledge with the Dominican Republic, to better manage tourist destinations that are sustainable, respectful of local culture and biodiversity through strengthened capacities and the testing of pilot projects. The project seeks to anchor knowledge in a practical and experiential way on biodiversity conservation and sustainable use through the Biodiversity Check tool, which can be accessed by third parties that aspire to similar goals of sustainable, resilient and biodiversity-responsible tourism.

59. The Costa Rican Tourism Institute is working with the national system of conservation areas on a sustainable tourism programme for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and natural resources. The work seeks to consolidate the management of sustainable tourism in the national system of conservation areas in order to contribute to the socioeconomic and environmental development of the country. In addition, in 2022, there was interest in renewing the agreement between the Ministry of the Environment and Energy and the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, in order to improve the infrastructure of protected areas, as well as the development of new options for growth and diversification of tourism products and the engagement of local communities with protected areas. In 2023, work is expected to take place on a total of 2,907 m² in the Tenorio Volcano National Park.

E. Building synergies and initiatives to address climate change, promote clean energy and build the resilience of tourism

60. The programmes of the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, along with its various alliances with other institutions, align with most of the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes the agreement with the National Forestry Financing Fund, which provides the option for tourists to offset their carbon footprint through the Payment for Environmental Services programme. The programme promotes the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, the protection of biodiversity for conservation, the sustainable use of resources, and the protection of water resources and the beauty of the landscape. As at October 2022, 893 carbon credits had been offset.

61. Nicaragua is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. To strengthen the resilience of its population to climate change impacts, the country has a national climate change policy in place, approved by Presidential Decree No. 04-2022, the main objectives of which are to contribute to the fight against poverty and foster sustainable human development in the country, thus building a society better prepared to respond to climate change impacts. The policy promotes a low-carbon economy based on environmentally, socially and economically sustainable production processes and services, which incorporate knowledge and innovation. It also promotes the expansion of the capabilities of and opportunities for

the population, as well as the conservation and responsible use of the country's natural heritage, respecting and harmonizing with the environment and the planet.

62. The national climate change policy of Nicaragua includes a chapter on adaptation and resilience of systems of agricultural production and tourism activities, which is aimed at promoting the cross-cutting incorporation of climate management in tourism activities, establishments and destinations, through an active commitment by stakeholders to a sustainable and resilient tourism model. Key lines of action include promoting sustainability as an added value of tourism activities, including adaptation to climate variability and change.

63. Nicaragua has implemented specific measures related to renewable energy to encourage sustainable tourism in the country. This includes installing more than 60 charging stations for electric vehicles across the country, thereby attracting tourism from the Central American region. In addition, the country boasts a solar park on Corn Island on the south Caribbean coast that supplies energy to the entire island, setting a precedent for the island's self-sustainability. The island's economic activity is fully dependent on tourism.

64. In order to increase electricity coverage in the country, Nicaragua has carried out more than 9,535 electrification projects since 2007 and has extended electricity supply to over 1.2 million homes in the country, with current coverage at a historic 99.1 per cent, thereby facilitating the development of tourist infrastructure and services. Nicaragua is also attracting sustainable and conscious tourism as a result of the changes to its energy matrix, leveraging the availability of clean energy sources to attract tourists. In the first five months of 2022, 70.02 per cent of the country's energy was generated from renewable resources.

65. In 2021, Panama adopted the "Reduce your corporate carbon footprint" (*Reduce tu huella corporativa-carbono*) technical standard, which is aimed at reducing the corporate carbon footprint, and established a virtual platform for it. This is the first State programme for managing carbon and water footprints at the organizational level in the country. The programme standardizes the process of identifying, calculating, reporting and verifying carbon and water footprints of the operations of public, private and civil society organizations that are registered in the country.

66. In Panama, as part of a programme for the holistic urban development of tourist towns financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, new investments have been allocated for the comprehensive management of solid waste in six tourist destinations. Owing to the significant importance of waste management for tourism development, the Panama Tourism Authority is working in six priority destinations of the master plan for sustainable tourism for the period 2020–2025, namely Bocas del Toro, Boquete, Pedasí, Santa Catalina, Taboga Island and Tierras Altas, in order to improve the collection and proper disposal of waste.

IV. Other sustainability efforts in the region

A. Certification and standard systems for sustainable tourism

67. The Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability is the first regional tourism quality label.¹⁴ It is aimed at micro-, small, and medium-sized tourism enterprises in Central America and is applicable to a variety of tourism businesses including accommodation, restaurants, vehicle rental companies, tour operators and thematic activities. The secretariat of Central American Tourism

¹⁴ See <https://selloq.inguat.gob.gt/index.php/en/siccs-seal/what-is-the-siccs-seal>.

Integration, through the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability structure, can standardize and develop regulations and procedures, providing support to countries in managing the system and promoting the brand in international markets.

68. Honduras, the first country in Central America to implement the Central American Integrated System for Quality and Sustainability, currently has 43 certified companies (including hotels and restaurants) and has served as the home of the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability since 2019. The office serves as the main base for member countries of the System, enabling its implementation and decision-making with regard to training, technical advice, improvements in standards and certification regulations.

69. In 2023, Honduras began to implement the Honduran tourism quality label under the strategic axis of quality and competitiveness of destination management organizations. The nationwide programme offers structured and ongoing monitoring of the quality and competitiveness of the tourism sector, and so companies that implement good sustainable tourism practices in their management and operations are eligible to be awarded the label. The national process prepares companies to then apply for regional quality labels, such as the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability.

70. Since 2021, technical assistance has been provided in Honduras to local committees implementing the Blue Flag ecology programme in tourist destinations such as La Ceiba and Tela, Atlántida; Roatán, Santos Guardiola and Utila, Bay Islands; Santa Fe and Trujillo, Colón; Gracias, Lempira; and Lago de Yojoa. The aim of the programme is to award a label that recognizes the efforts and voluntary work carried out by local committees on conservation and development in line with the protection of natural resources, addressing climate change, improving sanitary and hygienic conditions and enhancing the public health of local inhabitants.

71. Nicaragua continues to promote quality certification and tourism sustainability processes by recognizing the good management practices of tourism companies. The practices allow companies to improve tourist satisfaction, offer quality services, increase profitability and competitiveness, foster employee engagement and develop a culture of continuous improvement. A total of 277 companies obtained the “Moderniza” quality label during the period 2021–2022; 788 companies have obtained the “Safe travels” stamp from the World Travel and Tourism Council, and two companies are in the process of certification by the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability. Furthermore, 12,515 companies have signed the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.

72. Guatemala is making efforts to ensure that the tourism industry adopts quality and sustainability criteria through various certification programmes, such as the “Q Label” (Sello Q) for hotels, restaurants, tour operators and transport, and the “Green Q Label” (Sello Q Verde) for protected areas and national parks. Both labels represent recognition granted by the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism to tourism service providers that wish to implement quality and sustainability standards in their services, thereby establishing controls in processes and services that ensure tourist satisfaction and the safety and comfort of facilities.

73. At the Central American level, Guatemala collaborates with the secretariat of Central American Tourism Integration through the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability to adopt criteria for tourism quality and sustainability, with the aim of maximizing benefits in destination management and minimizing negative impacts in the economic, environmental and sociocultural fields.

To date, 49 tourism companies in Guatemala have been certified at the highest level by the Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability.

74. The tourism sustainability certification programme of Costa Rica provides guidelines for companies for building their business model on the basis of best practices in sustainable tourism. The standard for the certification was recognized in 2020 by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. In 2022, the number of certified companies increased by 87 per cent compared with 2021, with a total of 58 companies (27 at basic level and 31 elite level). The Costa Rican Tourism Institute has implemented a strategy to raise awareness of sustainability by hosting specialized talks. In addition to in-person training sessions and other methods for contributing to sectoral training, the Institute operates the “Capacita” platform, a virtual training tool for enhancing the skills, updating the knowledge and strengthening the capabilities of the country’s tourism entrepreneurs. A total of 156 courses are available, 6,179 people have registered, and a total of 13,058 courses have been completed.

B. Community tourism development

75. In Costa Rica, the integral tourist destination management programme is aimed at coordinating efforts between local governments, tourism entrepreneurs and the Costa Rican Tourism Institute to promote the integrated management of tourist destinations and reinforce the local management process to create conditions that enhance the competitiveness of those destinations. The programme’s objectives include formulating tourism development plans in development centres with a multidisciplinary team, as well as supporting local stakeholders in implementing the objectives of the management plans. By 2022, six destination management plans had been prepared, and one was delivered to La Fortuna de San Carlos. The remaining plans are scheduled to be delivered in 2023, and work will then begin on plans for three additional destinations.

76. In February 2022, Panama reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable tourism by signing a declaration on transformation towards the tourism of the future. The declaration, endorsed by tourism ministers, senior tourism officials and high-ranking managers of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, was made during the Association’s AdventureNEXT Latin America event held in Panama, which was the first time the event was held in Central America. The declaration was made in response to the call from UNWTO for both Governments and the private sector to rethink the development of the sector in the light of the impacts of the pandemic. The declaration was also endorsed by the ministers of tourism and the environment who participated in an intersectoral meeting in April 2022, as it promotes an international commitment to rebuild tourism in a more conscious manner, committing to emerging from the pandemic with greater alignment towards a sustainable future, as demanded by the planet and its people.

77. In October 2022, the Panama Tourism Authority, in collaboration with Panama for Nature and UNWTO, launched a community-based tourism competition, which concluded in May 2023, proclaiming the community of Mata Oscura in the province of Veraguas as the winner with its Turtle Eco Route (*Eco Ruta Tortuga*) experience. The competition was one of the UNWTO tourism start-up competitions and was aimed at fostering strategic alliances between tour operators and community groups to develop new ideas for innovative and unique tourism experiences in Panama, thereby contributing to the economic and sustainable development of their communities, while simultaneously bolstering the conservation and regeneration of natural and cultural treasures. The experiences are intended to expand the offering of transformative and unique products in line with the country’s master plan for sustainable tourism for the period 2020–2025.

C. Accessibility

78. Working towards inclusive services in the tourism industry and a genuine equality of opportunities in the enjoyment of tourist activities, the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism, together with the Committee for the Blind and Deaf of Guatemala, seeks to implement actions and programmes aimed at accessible tourism, as well as to raise awareness among host communities, service providers and local authorities on the importance of providing services that meet the needs of people with disabilities. This is carried out through a technical training and content interpretation programme that allows front-line service providers to acquaint themselves with the relevant legal framework, appropriate terminology, techniques, approaches and effective communication methods.

79. In August 2022, in order to enable more suitable access for people with disabilities and senior citizens on the trails of the Soberanía and Camino de Cruces national parks, authorities from the Ministry of Environment, the National Disability Secretariat and the Panama Tourism Authority conducted an inspection tour in order to be able to specify and develop conditions that promote obligatory minimum quality and safety standards for visitors with disabilities and senior citizens, as well as to promote the design and construction of ecological infrastructures that incorporate environmentally sustainable practices and materials.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

80. **The present report provides an overview of the approached and actions taken since the adoption of General Assembly resolution 76/201 in 2021, highlighting enhanced efforts to promote sustainable tourism and sustainable development among countries in the Central American region. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States are making significant progress towards recovery, employing an integrated and holistic approach for the sector in order to generate benefits for economies and biodiversity conservation, reducing the sector's considerable climate and environmental footprints, and contributing to the region's development and economic growth. A special focus on enhancing the resilience of the sector is also prioritized, in particular for the tourism-dependent countries in the region.**

81. **Member States have reported on actions, initiatives and advances made to include the most vulnerable sectors of the population in decision-making in the tourism sector, as a more decentralized and participatory approach to tourism ensures that no one is left behind and that the economic benefits reach the largest possible population, especially rural and local communities, and Indigenous Peoples. The approach also aims to advance the empowerment of women and girls, and provide opportunities for youth.**

82. **Tourism is contributing to poverty reduction through job creation and entrepreneurship opportunities, benefiting in particular youth, women, Indigenous Peoples and disadvantaged communities. Countries need support in their efforts to maximize the contribution of the sector to economic and social development and as part of rural strategies, through, for example, community-based tourism, which is aimed at improving the lifestyle, alleviating poverty and providing an alternative source of income for community members, while at the same time preserving and highlighting the value of local, cultural and natural resources.**

83. **The cross-cutting and labour-intensive nature of tourism creates links to many other economic sectors, positioning it as a valuable contributor to broader**

national development strategies. It is therefore important to adopt a comprehensive, multisectoral approach for the sustainable development of tourism, fostering the protection and empowerment of people and communities through coordinated and concerted efforts.

84. To ensure tourism continues to support inclusive economic growth and sustainable development, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of fostering community participation, especially among women, girls and youth, and supporting a stronger business environment and institutional networking and capacity-building for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of the tourism sector in many countries.

85. Member States are implementing a series of initiatives for promoting clean renewable energy and addressing climate change and environmental pollution, including through the promotion of the transversal incorporation of climate management in tourist activities and destinations, and the active commitment of tourism stakeholders to a sustainable and resilient tourism model.

86. The urgency and scale of the triple planetary crisis, in particular those related to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, require new responses at the policy level and from society at large. Addressing climate change remains a global challenge, and transforming tourism operations for climate action is critical for the sector in order to align with international goals and accelerate rapid emission reductions towards a zero-carbon future.

87. Tackling global problems such as biodiversity loss is equally critical for both the planet and the tourism sector, whose resilience and sustainability depend on healthy ecosystems. Major efforts continue to be made in the region to build a more sustainable sector and ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, through a combination of measures including countries' protected areas and sustainable management of natural resources through projects and initiatives that increase environmental awareness and collective action, and that use sustainable tourism practices as an enabling agent of change.

88. The global pandemic has also shifted focus to resilience in the tourism sector at the highest level. This has encouraged a stronger integration of tourism in national social, environmental and economic sustainable development plans, and the application of practical measures that are both inclusive and equitable, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.