

## **Towards an EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism**

Building forward smarter and greener in the EU coastal and insular regions

01.10.21 Online event

### **Summary of insights and key reflections**

The following reflections constitute the outcome of the online webinar co-organised by the [Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions](#) and co-funded by the [WINTER MED](#) project (Interreg MED programme) in the framework of the [Seas, Rivers, Islands and Coastal Areas Intergroup](#) of the European Parliament. This event was conceived as a virtual exchange between Members of the European Parliament, the European Commission, representatives from CPMR coastal and insular regions belonging to different sea basins of Europe and key territorial stakeholders.

### **Situation analysis: the sector's recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic**

The global health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the travel and tourism sector, particularly in coastal areas and islands. Despite the undeniable consequences, it has also represented a unique opportunity to reflect on the current tourism model and rebuild it differently, from overcrowded, poorly managed, and environmentally damaging, to well-managed growth implementing green measures.

Some European regions – especially in the Mediterranean basin – started to show the first signs of recovery during the summer season. The European Commission and Member States, through the Next Generation EU recovery funds, aim to boost this tourism recovery with special focus on green and digital transition. Some Member States in particular are already committed to the transformation of the tourism sector, including via the tourism component in their National Recovery Plans. EU funding support is equally important to finance a long-term strategy for recovery in the tourism sector and to recover those areas strictly dependent on tourism.

To lay the basis and support this transition, the EC is concluding a stakeholders' [consultation process](#) on the tourism transitional pathways to develop a 2030 and 2050 agenda for EU tourism. At the same time, the European Parliament drafted a 2021 [INI report](#) on an EU strategy for sustainable tourism to structure the guidelines towards a smarter, greener and more resilient sector.

The UN Climate Change Conference [COP26](#) will be held in Glasgow in November 2021 with the aim to strengthen climate ambition and action for the coming decade. In this context, the [Glasgow Declaration](#) on tourism and climate has been created to secure strong actions and commitment from the tourism sector prior to the COP and beyond, to cut tourism emissions at least in half over the next decade and reach Net Zero emissions as soon as possible and before 2050. This crucial conference will shape the climate targets for the coming years and influence SEArca's main objectives, also on tourism. Tourism has an important role to play, therefore, tourism stakeholders' subscription to the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism is essential to urgently work together within a consistent sector-wide approach to accelerate change.

## Tourism Transition and Blue Economy

Tourism is a heterogeneous and complex ecosystem that has social, economic, and environmental impacts on all European regions, particularly in coastal regions and islands. Financing mechanisms are needed to enable the transition to new tourism models, based on:

- **Green/blue development and new sustainable products;**
- **Digital transformation and capacity building;**
- **Cooperation and stakeholders' engagement.**

Strengthen the sustainable development of tourism, protect communities and natural habitats, secure carbon neutrality, and invest in nature-based solutions is essential to ensure a green transition.

Coastal destinations, natural areas and outdoor activities are currently the most popular choices among Europeans. In fact, coastal tourism - including accommodation, transport, and other expenditures - is the biggest sector across the Blue Economy. Overall, coastal tourism accounted for 64% of the jobs, 45% of the GVA and 41% of the profits in the EU Blue Economy in 2018<sup>1</sup>. However, such activities are particularly vulnerable since they rely on tourism seasonality and are highly exposed to the risk of climate change. That being so, tourists should be able to choose among a diverse portfolio of high-quality tourism products and experiences that are resource-efficient with a limited negative impact (e.g., out of peak season).

The development of sustainable products goes together with the sustainable blue economy approach and should be supported by a digital transformation, improving the digitalisation of infrastructures and SMEs operating in the sector, making a better and more ethical use of data and growing knowledge to facilitate data-driven decisions.

There is no future tourism model without a skilled workforce. All regions need to create knowledge clusters developing a generation of skilled workers. The EU must move rapidly in creating an EU tourism academy, with curricula specialising in specific regional needs.

Tourism transition must be done through an integrated approach that considers tourism in relation with other economic sectors and ensure communities benefit from new opportunities provided by tourism.

## Insular resilience

Islands are among the European territories that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Recovery strategies can be an opportunity to reshape the tourism sector integrating it with new technologies, giving importance to local communities, move from quantity to quality, and adapt tourism to the climate impact we are experiencing.

Nowadays, future insular tourism models face three major problems: economic dependency on the sector, the carbon footprint of transport (boat or plane), and reliance on imports (food and energy). Around these problems, four solutions have been suggested:

- Invest in renewable energy sources, such as solar power, wind power, marine and geothermal energy. Exploiting them can bring great socio-economic benefits, clean energy, and income;
- Study and prevent impacts in ecosystems in order to preserve natural environments and cultural heritage in Islands;
- Take advantage of recovery plans to end seasonality, invest in IT infrastructure, transform part of tourism into long stays that can possibly develop innovation clusters;

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/system/files/2021-05/the-eu-blue-economy-report-2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/system/files/2021-05/the-eu-blue-economy-report-2021_en.pdf)

- Invest in training a skilled work force by creating knowledge clusters in order to develop a generation of skilled workers, experts in island and regional needs that choose tourism as a career.

To achieve these objectives, cooperation (both inside and outside the island), sharing best practices and joining relevant projects are essential. Moreover, we should stress taking an integrated approach that considers tourism in relation with other economic sectors: circular economy, e-mobility, renewables, fisheries, the cultural field. Tourism has contributed to modify over time the socio-economic realities in islands, therefore, it is necessary to set a long-term strategic objective to re-establish balance in Islands' tourism sector.

### WINTER MED cooperation project for all year-round tourism in Mediterranean Islands

The WINTER MED project is co-financed by the [Interreg MED Programme](#), through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It brings together 6 Mediterranean island territories to tackle one major shared issue: over-tourism during the summer months and a low level of tourism activity during the winter months, replying to the necessity to pay greater attention to the island territories and foster their collaboration on common challenges. It promotes the transition from the 3S (Sea-Sun-Sand) tourism of insular tourism destinations during the summer to alternative, sustainable, year-round use of these territories.

The project provides tools to change and upgrade tourism, which represents one of the key sectors of the Mediterranean area, and innovative solutions to increase the resilience of the tourism sector and commits to its diversification as a crucial means to overthrow seasonality, **through the design of the WINTER MED transnational strategy**. It specifically supports local SMEs and micro-enterprises as motors for the sustainable recovery of the sector, thanks to their direct implication within the regional action plans.

The WINTER MED transnational strategy is based on 6 strategic axes and 5 instrumental axes, more operational, that will allow this joint development of sustainability year-round tourism in the Mediterranean:

Strategic axes	Instrumental axes
Innovation	Funding
Governance	Capacity building
Connectivity	Business intelligence
Biodiversity and waste management	Product development
Urban planning and development	Communication and marketing
Links with other sectors	

During the SEARica event a project partner of WINTER MED, Cyprus, and Elba, an associated company to Tuscany Regional Action Plan, shared their local perspectives and benefits of joining WINTER MED:

**Cyprus** is studying a regional action plan in line with WINTER MED main actions, to turn the Island into an all-year-round tourism destination. The Island is seeking to solve its main problems by structuring a strategy that has as main objectives to deliver a system of high value and well-planned experience in Cyprus, attract the right number of investors and MSMEs, and finally increase tourism's benefit for local communities and the environment.

In 2020\21 **Elba**, a small island located in the Tyrrhenian Sea, adopted a common vision of sustainable development, shared with a large number of stakeholders both public and private. WINTER MED represented the first moment of facilitation among all these actors, from which emerged a shared action plan to achieve carbon-neutrality in the island and adopt a series of sustainable behaviours in the tourist sector: minimize water consumption and energy consumption in hotels, cleaning with non-toxic products; ban single-use plastics in the Island and increase the number of charging stations for electric cars.

WINTER MED has started to engage other territories through a first engagement forum held at the CPMR Intermediterranean Commission's Tourism and Culture Task Force meeting last July. Follow-up meetings with interested regions are currently being prepared. The partners have also drawn up a list of stakeholders who may be interested in replicating the methodology by committing to the project through an MoU. The transnational strategy will soon be shared, and the first policy recommendations gathered at this event will be completed before being widely disseminated through the follow-up of the advocacy campaign, via social networks.