



SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION CHARTER

A GUIDING FRAMEWORK FOR TOURISM DESTINATIONS

The Cape Cod Charter was co-created November 4-6, 2025 at the 2025 World Tourism Forum, hosted by the Center for Responsible Travel and CARE for the Cape & Islands on Cape Cod, MA. The document was further drafted and refined in the months that followed.



I. Introduction

From 4-6 November 2025, an unconventional sustainability-themed conference took place on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, (USA). Called the World Tourism Forum, it turned out to be about much more than tourism.

The tourism industry is frequently criticized for remaining too firmly within its own silo, for focusing on its businesses with only token regard for the destinations on which those businesses depend.

This Forum was different. In addition to the usual array of sustainable tourism experts from far afield, it also hosted local participants representing both tourism – and critically – nontourism realms. The diversity of participants and panelists reflected the complimentary scopes of the event conveners: the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), with a global focus, and CARE for the Cape & Islands, with a local focus. The result was a combination of presentations, conversations, workshops, and networking informed by perspectives from all sides of the tourism-silo wall.

Cape Cod was the perfect backdrop - a popular and well-developed destination, blessed with great beaches and a rich history, and coping with problems that have become commonplace across many destinations – seasonal crowding, traffic, high prices, climate-related threats and more. It provided the Forum with a rich variety of points of view – housing experts, ecologists, historians, indigenous representatives, climatologists, transportation specialists, and even interested residents.

UN Tourism, the champion for “World Tourism Day,” suggested that 2025 celebrations focus on the theme “sustainable transformation”. While deliberately scheduled several weeks after the official day of September 27, the World Tourism Forum participants agreed to follow the UN lead and consolidate their discussions and lessons learned into a Sustainable Transformation Charter – a unique set of guidelines and imperatives that may be useful for popular and aspiring destinations anywhere.

Those guidelines and imperatives, hereafter known as the “Cape Cod Charter,” follow and are offered openly for use, adaptation, and application.

II. Purpose

How can we transform travel policies and practices to sustain the destinations we love?

This guiding question, posed at the Forum's outset, encapsulates the Charter's purpose. The goal is to give destinations a shared direction of travel: aligning tourism with long-term community wellbeing and environmental health. In essence, the Charter is a blueprint for thinking about sustainable transformation – a set of lenses that can be applied in very different places, at very different scales.

Each imperative described below reflects:

- A problem or threat that surfaced repeatedly at the Forum, and
- A policy lens (how we shape the enabling environment), and
- A practice lens (how we behave, invest, and operate day-to-day).

Destinations should adapt these lenses to their own context, rather than copy a fixed model.



III. Imperatives

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Imperative 1: Shared Governance and Stewardship:

Destination Stewardship through Inclusive, Collaborative Governance

The problem we heard: Destinations grapple with complex, overlapping pressures – climate risk, housing, mobility, visitor volumes, and the loss of distinctive character – yet tourism is still too often handled as a marketing function rather than a shared community responsibility. On Cape Cod, as in many other places represented at the Forum, speakers talked candidly about fragmented decision-making, competing “visions” for the destination, and a lack of clear stewardship structures.

Policy Lens: Build the table before inviting people to it. Destination governance must match the complexity of the system. This means:

- Establishing destination stewardship councils or similar structures at the regional or local level that bring together government, Indigenous, and local communities, tourism businesses, scientists, conservation and heritage organizations, and other sectors. Build a table large enough not only for traditional tourism stakeholders, but also for representatives of all the communities and characteristics that make up that place.
- Granting these bodies a government mandate, not just an advisory role. They should be able to inform policy, funding priorities, and long-term planning on such topics as land use, transport, housing, climate, tourism practices, and others.
- Pooling funding and human resources for stewardship across multiple organizations so responsibility is shared and not dependent on any single leader or budget.
- Using tourism-related revenues (occupancy taxes, visitor fees, business levies) to help finance workforce housing, infrastructure, and other essential services for community well-being – making visible what visitor dollars are funding.
- Embedding tourism’s role within broader policy frameworks such as regional climate action plans and economic development strategies.

Practice Lens: Change how we show up and make decisions. In practice, shared governance means changing daily habits and routines:

- Design community meetings and engagement processes that amplify local voices – especially those who do not typically attend town halls or boardrooms. That may mean meeting people where they are (schools, community centers, churches, WhatsApp groups), rather than expecting them to come to you.

- Treat data and storytelling as shared assets by pairing quantitative information with lived experience, and leveraging resident sentiment, visitor behavior, and environmental data so all stakeholders are working from a common reality.
- Reconsider “more is better” mandates for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). Even in developing destinations, prioritizing quality over volume can yield more nuanced growth strategies and forestall future overtourism threats.
- Integrate disagreement and discomfort – related to resident annoyances, crowds, exclusion, inequities, and housing – as part of the process, not problems to be “managed away,” but sources of insight into real trade-offs.
- Commit to continuity for long-term sustainability by establishing guiding principles and institutional structures that allow councils and collaborations to endure beyond individual leaders, political cycles, or short-term projects.



Imperative 2: Livability, Housing and Shared Prosperity

Adopt Tourism Practices that Help Destinations Remain Livable, Affordable, and Equitable for Residents

The problem we heard: Cape Cod leaders and residents describe a housing market inflated by second homes and short-term rentals, where teachers, hospitality workers, and young families are pushed out, and where seasonal volatility makes it hard to build a stable life. Similar stories emerged from other popular destinations: tourism growing ---> communities hollowing out.

Policy Lens: Treat housing and services in and near tourism zones as infrastructure. If tourism relies on people, then housing, childcare, transport and health services are tourism infrastructure. This means:

- Recognizing housing as a core pillar of a destination's infrastructure, not an adjacent social issue. Tourism strategies should explicitly address housing demand and workforce needs.
- Reforming zoning to allow a mix of housing types in appropriate areas – multi-family, mixed-use, infill – rather than limiting development to large-lot or vacation-home zones.
- Collaborating with local government and housing authorities to advocate for short-term rental policies that prioritize community well-being, with an eye to parity and impact (including caps, where necessary). Every destination is different, and STR policy should adapt accordingly.
- Building state or regional enabling frameworks (such as Massachusetts' seasonal community and STR tax reforms) so local governments are not left to address challenges alone.

Practice Lens: Align business models with community wellbeing. This imperative pushes us to ask: Does our business model support or erode the community we depend on?

- Co-invest in housing solutions by using tools such as master leases, employer-assisted housing, co-financing nonprofit housing projects, or contributing land where appropriate.
- Elevate housing and livability as core advocacy priorities for chambers, DMOs, and industry associations, rather than treating them as peripheral issues.
- Favor adaptive reuse & partnerships with community land trusts or mission-driven developers over speculative buy-to-let short-term rental models where possible.

Imperative 3: Environment, Climate, and the Blue Economy

Make Climate Resilience, Conservation, and Investment in Natural Heritage Non-Negotiables for Destination Viability

The problem we heard: From nitrogen-polluted estuaries on Cape Cod to wildfire, extreme storms, and coastal erosion elsewhere, it is clear that environmental degradation is not theoretical. Yet many destinations remain locked into a growth-based paradigm that treats natural systems as limitless, even when local leaders know they are not.

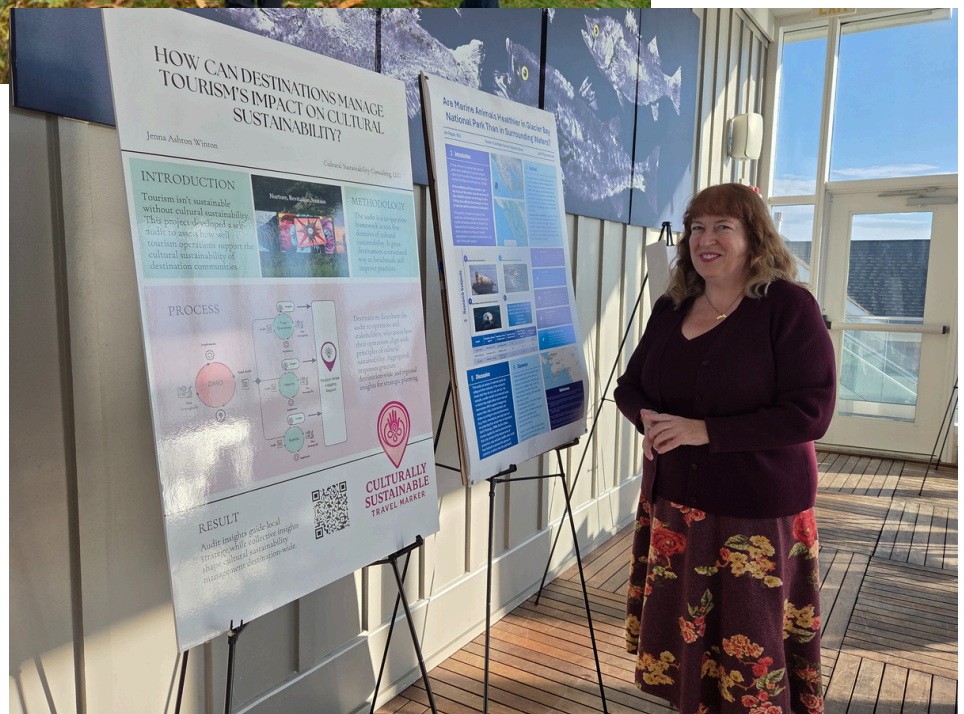
Policy Lens: Plan for climate reality, not nostalgia. This imperative calls for moving from reactive mitigation to proactive, scenario-based planning:

- Developing and updating climate and coastal resilience plans related to tourism: evacuation routes, insurance and risk-sharing mechanisms, vulnerable infrastructure, and land-use decisions that anticipate sea-level rise and extreme events.
- Caring for natural infrastructure as a mandatory first line of defense and biodiversity reservoir, as well as a core tourism asset: dunes, wetlands, forests, seagrass beds, as well as mangroves and coral reefs in lower latitudes.
- Embedding limits and thresholds – such as visitor caps, seasonal closures, gear requirements – into permitting and regulation frameworks for high-risk or fragile areas.
- Using environmental taxes and fees (lodging surcharges, conservation levies, cruise/passenger fees) to fund wastewater upgrades, habitat restoration, and monitoring, with transparent reporting back to residents and visitors.
- Integrating local conservation and tourism connections into K–12 and post-secondary education curricula (science, economics, history, and vocational training) to foster community pride, ownership, and year-round tourism career pathways.

Practice Lens: Operate as if “the environment and the economy are one”. This imperative asks everyone in the tourism system to act like the environment is not a backdrop, but the balance sheet:

- Shift from “more” to “better”: DMOs and branding efforts can de-market overstressed natural sites and design itineraries that disperse or contain visitor use to appropriate places and times.
- Audit and reduce operational impacts in the hospitality industry (energy, water, waste) and invest directly in local restoration projects – oyster reefs, marsh restoration, trail maintenance, forest management – to protect the destinations on which these businesses depend.

- Position guides and frontline staff as environmental interpreters, exposing guests to the realities of local ecosystems and climate impacts in ways that encourage behavior change.
- Invite visitors and students to participate in volunteer days and scientific, socially enjoyable activities led by tourism businesses and community organizations – citizen science, restoration projects, reef or dune planting, and the like.



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Imperative 4: Visitor Behavior, Storytelling, and Culture

Influence Visitor Behavior to Reflect and Reinforce Residents' Values

The problem we heard: Most people do not set out to harm a place. However, they often arrive with expectations, habits, and mental models of what it means to be a “good tourist” that differ significantly from those of the host community. Throughout the Forum, participants shared examples of this gap – visitors seeking influencer-driven content that overwhelms neighborhoods, or assuming carbon-intensive, all-inclusive trips are “responsible” simply because they include a cultural component.

Policy Lens: Embed expectations and cultural integrity into the experience. Destinations can be explicit about the types of visitor behavior that align with local values and limits by:

- Making public investment in culture, interpretation, and storytelling a core tourism priority rather than an afterthought.
- Co-developing visitor behavior codes and pledges with residents, Indigenous communities, and businesses, and visibly integrating them into the buyer’s journey, wayfinding, signage, and visitor orientation.
- Protecting cultural and sacred sites through clear governing protocols on access, interpretation, photography, and commerce with those whose heritage is at stake.
- Ensuring that destination marketing and product development reflect on-the-ground realities – avoiding promotion of “secret spots” that cannot sustain visitation and portraying carefree consumption in places facing water scarcity or climate risk.

Practice Lens: Use narrative to shift norms. This imperative is where guides, hosts, content creators, and educators have outsized influence:

- Design visitor journeys that begin with context: who lives here, who was here first, what pressures the place faces, and how visitors can contribute positively.
- Train guides to act as “Gandalfs, not Frodos” – not the hero of the story, but the trusted companion helping travelers engage more deeply & respectfully with place.
- Support diverse, community - or locally-owned - tourism business development through training, market research, small business grants, and access to markets, to enhance the local tourism supply chain.
- Normalize responsible behavior through campaigns such as “Take Care” or locally adapted equivalents, reinforcing expectations around waste, trails, wildlife, & water.
- Support local artists, storytellers, and cultural organizations in telling their stories – through performances, installations, murals, and festivals – so visitors encounter a living culture rather than a staged product.

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Imperative 5: Innovation, Technology, and Long-Term Investment

Use Technology and Sustainable Financing to Support a Just, Resilient Tourism System

The problem we heard: Technological forces – such as platform economies and agentic artificial intelligence, that did not exist a decade ago are changing traveler behavior and tourism operations. Yet, responsible tourism efforts are often funded hand-to-mouth, project by project, while billions flow through tourism systems with few ways to capture and reinvest it.

Policy Lens: Design for a just, data-informed transition. This imperative asks tourism practitioners to be simultaneously curious and cautious:

- Setting guardrails for technology and platform use that protect housing, labor rights, intellectual property, privacy, and the environment (e.g., STR regulations, data-sharing requirements, ethical AI guidelines).
- Basing decisions on strong evidence by investing in shared data systems – covering resident sentiment, environmental indicators, and visitor flows – available across sectors.
- Creating or strengthening dedicated funding mechanisms – visitor levies, tourism improvement districts, “1% for the place” programs, default-donation schemes – with clear governance and transparency around how funds are allocated and used.
- Aligning incentives to encourage collaborating on stewardship and responsible tourism, including participation in climate alliances or tourism–housing coalitions.

Practice Lens: Use tools and money differently. This imperative focuses on deploying existing tools and resources more effectively.

- Use AI and digital tools to improve the visitor experience and reduce pressure on staff and sites (e.g., real-time information, itinerary suggestions that decongest flows). Pair that with reskilling programs so workers aren’t left behind.
- Build coalitions of investors, operators, and community organizations around specific initiatives – such as a coastal resilience initiative, a community tourism network, or climate-smart transportation systems – leveraging both public and private capital.
- Track return on investment not only in financial terms, but also in reduced risk, avoided costs, and increased destination resilience.
- Expand access to technology education, tools, and learning opportunities for underserved populations to ensure innovation supports inclusive tourism development.

IV. Conclusion

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A Living Framework

This Sustainable Transformation Charter is a starting point, not an endpoint. It distills what surfaced – urgently and honestly – at the Cape Cod Forum into a set of lenses that destinations can use to interrogate their choices and chart a more sustainable path forward.

The work ahead is to adapt this Charter to your own destination, translating these imperatives into policies, projects, partnerships, and everyday practices that suit the specific context of your destination.

The idea is simple:

- Use these imperatives to clearly identify your problems;
- Use the policy lenses to rethink the conditions that created them; and
- Use the practice lenses to transform how you operate, invest, and host.

And then, as we emphasized together on Cape Cod: **Be bold. Be honest. And be willing to work with people outside your usual circles.** That is where sustainable transformation begins – and where the destinations we love still have a chance to thrive.



IV. Conclusion

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