



TRC



Tourism Accreditation and
Biodiversity Conservation Projects
An assessment of indicators and targets
for the Ridge to Reef Project

COOK ISLANDS

August 2020



NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT SERVICE
TU'ANGA TAPOROPORO
COOK ISLANDS



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The COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. Travel to the Cook Islands was restricted and the assessment of the R2R indicators and targets was undertaken through desktop research, consultation with the client and partners through on line meetings and an online survey for tourism businesses.

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Abbreviations

ADV	ADVANCED ECOTOURISM
CA	CLIMATE ACTION
CBD	CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
CCA	COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA
CI	COOK ISLANDS
CIMP	COOK ISLANDS MARINE PARK
CIQA	COOK ISLANDS QUALITY ASSURED
CIT	COOK ISLANDS TOURISM CORPORATION
CITIC	COOK ISLANDS TOURISM INDUSTRY COUNCIL
CST	CERTIFICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROGRAM
EA	ECOTOURISM AUSTRALIA
EEZ	EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE
EIA	ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENTS
GBRMPA	GREAT BARRIER MARINE PARK AUTHORITY
GDP	GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT
GEF	GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY
GSTC	GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM COUNCIL
ICT	COSTA RICAN TOURISM BOARD
KBA	KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTEC	MANA TIAKI ECO CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
NES	NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT SERVICE
NGO	NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION
QuEST	QUEENSLAND ECO AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
R2R	COOK ISLANDS RIDGE TO REEF
ROC	RESPECTING OUR CULTURE
SRF	STRATEGIC RESULTS FRAMEWORK
STDPF	SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT POLICY FRAMEWORK
SWOT	STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THREATS
TIES	THE INTERNATIONAL ECOTOURISM SOCIETY
TIS	TE IPUKAREA SOCIETY
UNEP	UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME
UNWTO	UNITED NATIONS WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION
VSTAP	VANUATU STRATEGIC TOURISM ACTION PLAN
VTOMS	VANUATU TOURISM OPERATORS MINIMUM STANDARDS
VTPAP	VANUATU TOURISM PERMIT AND ACCREDITATION PROGRAM
VTPCS	VANUATU TOURISM PRODUCT CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM
VTSP	VANUATU SUSTAINABLE TOURISM POLICY
WATSAN	WATER, WASTE AND SANITATION
WHO	WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

Glossary

Accreditation

Accreditation is a process of qualifying, endorsing, and "licensing" entities that perform certification of businesses, products, processes, or services. In other words, an accreditation program certifies the certifiers. Accreditation is the term used for the higher stage process whereby a body not associated with any certification scheme, certifies that the certification schemes themselves meet an appropriate standard. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council is recognised as the global accreditation agency for sustainable tourism certification.

Biodiversity

Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines the term, 'biological diversity' to mean the "variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."

Certification

Certification is a voluntary procedure that assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system conforms to specific requirements. It awards a marketable logo or seal to those that meet or exceed baseline standards. UNEP & UNWTO (2005, p. 102) more broadly define certification as a "mechanism for ensuring that an activity or product meets certain standards that may be set by government or agreed upon within an industry sector."

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a type of sustainable tourism that is usually conducted in natural areas and has a focus on education and interpretation. The core difference in the definitions of ecotourism and sustainable tourism is the requirement that ecotourism takes place in predominately natural areas. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015).

Ecotourism certification programs cover businesses, services, and activities that describe themselves as involved in ecotourism. They focus on individual or site-specific businesses, have standards that are tailored to local conditions, and are often largely or totally performance-based.

Northern Group



Source: Map - Cook Islands Tourism <https://cookislands.travel/au>

Executive Summary

The Cook Islands Ridge to Reef (R2R) project is funded by the UNDP Global Environment Facility (GEF) in partnership with the Cook Islands Government. The project aims to build national and local capacities to ensure effective conservation of biodiversity, food security and livelihoods and the enhancement of ecosystem functions within Marae Moana, a multiple-use marine park which extends over the entire Exclusive Economic Zone of the Cook Islands. The project's efforts are directed to (i) strengthening protected area management and (ii) reducing threats to biodiversity stemming from tourism and agriculture activities adjacent to marine and terrestrial protected areas¹.

The tourism industry is the key driver for economic growth in the Cook Islands, contributing over 70% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is one of the key threats to biodiversity and conservation. Recent environmental indicators suggest that areas of concern are waste management, biodiversity loss, lagoon water quality and the state of the reef.

The R2R project aims to reduce the impact of tourism on biodiversity through (i) the establishment of environmental guidelines and a national tourism accreditation system and (ii) tourism industry contribution and support for biodiversity conservation projects. The project's targets are set out in the Strategic Results Framework as follows:

- At least 20 tourism businesses are implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines included in the national accreditation system; and
- At least 15 biodiversity conservation projects are operating by the end of the project.

This report focuses on the extent to which these targets have been achieved. It provides recommendations to strengthen the national tourism accreditation system and enable the tourism industry to better support biodiversity conservation.

Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council (CITIC) play an important role in supporting the R2R project and mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the operations and practices of the tourism industry to reduce the impact on biodiversity. This is not without its challenges as the tourism sector is made up of over 350 small and medium enterprises.

The Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme provides a minimum industry standard across a range of areas. It is a membership-based programme for members of the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council. There are many tourism businesses who choose not to be members of the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council and therefore not certified under the Quality Assurance Programme.

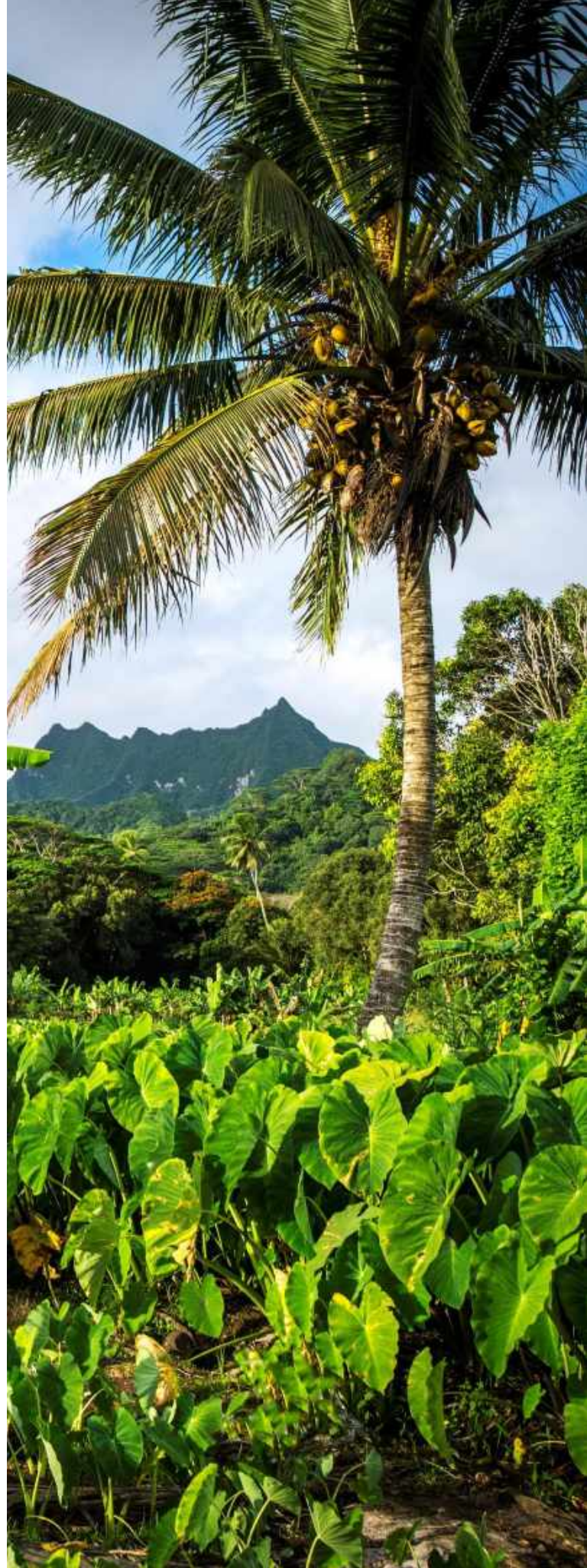
In 2018 the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation contracted Te Ipukarea Society (TIS), a local NGO, to develop and manage the eco-tourism certification scheme known as Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Scheme (MTEC). The Ridge to Reef project funded TIS to establish and manage MTEC, with the aim of ensuring criteria that supported biodiversity and conservation projects were included in the assessment criteria.

The Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programme provides eco certification for businesses wanting to achieve higher levels of environmental sustainability than provided by the Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme.

¹ Conserving biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem functions through a "Ridge to Reef" approach in the Cook Islands, Project Documentation, UNDP 2015

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- In 2019 there were 393 tourism operators registered with CIT and certified with the Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme
- Of the 393 businesses registered with CIT, only 41 businesses had achieved Mana Tiaki Eco Certification in 2019 (10%). Of this total, the majority were accommodation providers (85%), 5 were tour and activity providers (12%) and one business is a travel agency
- The analysis shows that the establishment of the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programme has had a positive influence on the tourism industry's support for biodiversity conservation projects. However the take up of eco certification across the sector is low and the type and location of businesses that are eco certified is underrepresented
- Enterprises offering visitor activities and tour activities make up the second largest number of businesses (68 businesses) in the Cook Islands, however only five are eco certified. The nature and location of the activities that these businesses undertake are likely to have an impact on the biodiversity and conservation on the Marae Moana marine protected area
- Encouraging these businesses to become eco certified should be considered a priority as they can actively contribute to the protection and management of the Marae Moana marine protected area
- This can be achieved by providing tangible benefits to businesses such as preferred access to protected areas, longer permit periods and capacity to take greater number of visitors
- These results suggest that whilst MTEC is enabling tourism businesses to actively participate in biodiversity conservation there is an immediate opportunity for significant improvement.



RIDGE TO REEF STRATEGIC RESULTS FRAMEWORK - NUMBER 21 AND 22

	SRF #	Indicator	End of Project Target	End of Project Assessment
The Cook Islands national tourism accreditation system	21	Impact of tourism businesses on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in targeted key biodiversity areas (KBAs)	At least 20 tourism businesses are implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines developed through the project and included in the national accreditation system.	As at December 2019, 41 businesses were implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with the conservation guidelines recommended by R2R and were included in the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification programme. The project has therefore achieved its target level of performance for this indicator.

	SRF #	Indicator	End of Project Target	End of Project Assessment
Biodiversity conservation projects implemented by tourism operators.	22	# of projects by tourism operators that support biodiversity conservation (e.g. creating Ra'ui sites / CCAs; coral gardens; beach clean-up; sponsored species conservation)	At least 15 projects operating by the end of the project	As at December 2019, 14 businesses were implementing or supporting approximately 20 identifiable biodiversity management programs. The project has therefore achieved its target level of performance for this indicator.

NEXT STEPS

A survey of tourism businesses undertaken as part of the analysis suggests that MTEC certified operators believe the positive benefits of certification to be improved business practices and resource savings and efficiencies. They found the certification process to be educational as it increased their knowledge and awareness about sustainability and equipped them with policies and processes to improve business practices through learning about sustainability. Certification also provided operators with validation of their performance and provided them with a 'good corporate conscience'.

The analysis indicates that the certification process facilitates learning and sharing of knowledge about sustainability between all stakeholders. Certification appears to encourage better or exemplary practices and fostering knowledge and shared learning is a benefit valued by the industry.

The main barrier to businesses becoming MTEC certified appear to be cost. Most tourism businesses are small and for many, the cost associated with participating in the process (e.g. meeting the inspection fee, and, potentially, complying with the requirements) is greater than the perceived benefits.

For Cook Islands Tourism and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council the main advantages of MTEC certification is that it can help to raise the market profile and image of the Cook Islands in terms of its quality and environmental standards. It can provide a way of encouraging the industry to raise standards in specifically identified areas and potentially lower regulatory costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen certification criteria for Quality Assurance and MTEC Programmes

- Integrate MTEC into the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Framework (without compromising standards)
- Increase the **minimum environmental standards** for Cook Islands Quality Assurance Framework for all operators
- Use the GSTC criteria to strengthen the biodiversity and ecosystem service components of the certification system and align the standards to focus on **priority areas for biodiversity and environmental sustainability** for the Cook Islands
- Create a tiered system of certification creating a pathway for all businesses within the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme to achieve Basic Eco Certification (Silver) and Advanced Eco Certification (Gold) based on a points system (minimum level)
- To address the perceived barriers to eco certification it is recommended that consideration be given to the range of **financial and non-financial incentives** that can be provided to encourage businesses to become and stay certified, for example discounted or preferential access to marketing, training and awards initiatives. The scheme will need to produce consistent quality outcomes and provide for differentiation from nonaccredited products and services
- Refine **measurement and monitoring** mechanisms to facilitate a clearer understanding of the effects of eco certification on business performance and the impact of eco certification on addressing the environmental issues in the Cook Islands for both program managers and certified businesses. This is critical for measuring the effectiveness of the program

- Support for biodiversity and conservation should be facilitated through workshops, training, communication, commitment, and ownership of programs for example setting up local or regional networks of accredited businesses. This should be offered to eco certified and non-certified businesses
- Use the certification programme to promote investment in infrastructure that protects and supports sustainable tourism- including effective management and expansion of protected areas, and restoration of ecosystem services, for example, by rehabilitating reefs, wetlands and forested areas
- The minimum standard should have an explicit goal of making a significant contribution towards halting the loss of biological diversity, and in creating the conditions to help achieve an increase in biodiversity
- Experience provides several pointers to good practice in certification (as shown in the Case Studies) which should be kept in mind when developing new schemes or strengthening the existing ones. They include:
 - » Link certification to capacity building, mainly by strengthening the advice and personal help given to applicants and at the time of inspection, and by delivering associated training programmes
 - » Including government services in the certification process to strengthen official ties and encourage enterprises by demonstration
 - » Ensure that the requirements and processes are as simple and clear as possible, enabling ease of audit and rapid compliance
 - » Pursue more specific ways of giving teeth to the scheme and linking it to other policy areas.

Multi-stakeholder structures and participatory processes

Develop a collaborative approach toward the development of the eco certification system to increase awareness, share knowledge, and provide access to skills and resources, and outreach of influence. This requires government agencies, NGOs, protected area managers and the tourism industry to engage in the planning and operations relating to tourism activities that impact on protected areas and biodiversity.

Developing networks of tourism businesses to help each other will secure more participation and increase the chances of implementation of good practice over time. Networks may be geographically or thematically based.





What traffic? The Kia Orana Aunties driving along in Rarotonga, David Kirkland

1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the project including background, purpose and method of analysis and an outline of the structure of the report.

1.1 Background

TRC Tourism was engaged by Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) in partnership with National Environment Service (NES) to undertake a stream of work aimed at engaging the tourism sector in biodiversity conservation as part of the Cook Island Ridge to Reef project (R2R).

1.2 Cook Islands Ridge to Reef Project

Marae Moana is a multiple-use marine park which extends over the entire Exclusive Economic Zone of the Cook Islands, an area of 1.9 million square kilometres. It is currently the largest commitment by a single country for integrated management and conservation from ridge to reef and from reef to ocean. Marae Moana was established under the Marae Moana Act 2017 which has the primary purpose of protecting and conserving the “ecological, biodiversity and heritage values of the Cook Islands marine environment.” By Marae Moana, the Government signalled its commitment to sustainable development and its intention to balance economic growth interests in sectors such as such as tourism, fishing, and agriculture with biodiversity conservation objectives².

The Convention of Biological Diversity³ (CBD) advocates an ‘ecosystems approach’ to planning for tourism and biodiversity. This is an

approach which involves the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and equitable use in a sustainable way. This approach is in line with the extensively used concept of sustainable tourism, which “takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the sector, the environment and host communities”. Biological diversity has been recognized as one of 12 interrelated aims of sustainable tourism, with others covering a range of economic, social and environmental impacts.

The Cook Islands Ridge to Reef (R2R) project is funded by the UNDP Global Environment Facility (GEF) in partnership with the Cook Islands Government. The project aims to build national and local capacities to ensure effective conservation of biodiversity, food security and livelihoods and the enhancement of ecosystem functions within the CIMP. The project’s efforts are directed to (i) strengthening protected area management and (ii) reducing threats to biodiversity stemming from tourism and agriculture activities adjacent to marine and terrestrial protected areas⁴. The Cook Islands National Environment Service (NES) is the lead agency for R2R, responsible for project management, coordination and collaboration with implementation partners and the Strategic Results Framework (SRF).

² Conserving biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem functions through a “Ridge to Reef” approach in the Cook Islands, Project Documentation, UNDP 2015

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

1.3 Cook Islands Key Biodiversity

Areas and Tourism

The biodiversity of the Cook Islands is spread across a wide range of landscapes and ecosystems and is one of the foundations for the nation’s social and economic prosperity. Ecosystems defined by the R2R project include all terrestrial and marine environments (coastlines, lagoons, reefs) to the outer edge of the reefs surrounding each island as well as areas of the Marae Moana marine park beyond the reefs and the seven inhabited islands of Rarotonga, Aitutaki, Atiu, Mangaia, Mauke, Mitiaro and Palmerston, as well as two uninhabited islands of Takutea and Manuae.

Tourism is the primary economic sector for the country contributing over 70% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product.

The R2R project identified the importance of balancing tourism development and reducing the threat to biodiversity and ecosystem functioning adjacent to or upstream from protected areas or other critical ecosystems in many parts of the Cook Islands. The R2R project stakeholders determined that the most effective mechanism to address this concern was to mainstream biodiversity conservation into the operations and practices of the tourism industry through (i) the establishment of environmental guidelines and a national tourism accreditation system and (ii) tourism industry contribution and support for biodiversity conservation projects. The importance of these mechanisms is recognised in the Strategic Results Framework for the R2R project which includes indicators and targets as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategic Results Framework – Tourism Sector

Area	SRF #	Description of Indicator	End of project target level
The Cook Islands national tourism accreditation system	21	Impact of tourism businesses on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in targeted key biodiversity areas (KBAs)	At least 20 tourism businesses are implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines developed through the project and included in the national accreditation system.
Biodiversity conservation projects implemented by tourism operators.	22	# of projects by tourism operators that support biodiversity conservation (e.g. creating Ra’ui sites / CCAs; coral gardens; beach clean-up; sponsored species conservation)	At least 15 projects operating by the end of the project

While some tourism operators were making their operations more sustainable, at the time the R2R project was established, the national system for accrediting tourism businesses had very few environmental criteria, and no mechanism (endorsement or star rating) to recognize those tourism operators who are excelling at environmental sustainability. It was noted that less than five tourism businesses in the Cook Islands were actively implementing environmental management programs⁵.

In addition, tourism operators had few guidelines or training on how to improve their environmental performance. Similarly, only a few tourism operators had implemented programs to support environmental protection programs (e.g. support for creating Ra'ui sites; establishment of coral gardens; etc.). It was noted that there were six on-going projects but these examples were not well known and there was official support for expanding these programs by sharing best practices or recognizing industry leaders.⁶

It was recognised that Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CIT) and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council (CITIC) play an important role in mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the operations and practices of the tourism industry. This includes the incorporation of ecological / biodiversity conservation criteria into the existing tourism accreditation system (Cook Islands Tourism Quality Assurance Programme) with the goal of reducing the impacts of tourism on the environment. It was recognised that CIT and CITIC could also encourage tourism operators to support biodiversity conservation through a range of different projects.

In 2018 the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation contracted Te Ipukarea Society (TIS), a local NGO, to develop and manage the eco-tourism certification scheme known as Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Scheme (MTEC). The Ridge to Reef project funded TIS to establish and manage MTEC, with the aim of ensuring criteria that supported biodiversity and conservation projects were included in the assessment criteria.

⁵ Conserving biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem functions through a "Ridge to Reef" approach in the Cook Islands, Project Documentation, UNDP



© Ibid 2015

The infamous One Foot Island from above, Aitutaki, David Kirkland

1.4 R2R performance indicators and targets

In order to determine the extent to which the R2R targets have been achieved, it is important to understand the terminology used in the indicators such as 'conservation guidelines' and 'biodiversity conservation projects'. A review of the documentation suggests that the intention was to develop the 'conservation guidelines' as part of the certification framework with emphasis on strengthening the criteria relevant to biodiversity conservation and that the guidelines would include:

- Measures to reduce negative impacts on sensitive habitat, such as wastewater treatment systems (e.g. primary and secondary filters) and the use of eco-friendly laundry detergent
- Development using biodiversity friendly infrastructure
- Implementation and/or sponsorship of at least one biodiversity conservation related project by a tourism operator
- Adoption of biodiversity friendly practices (whale watching guidelines; boat anchoring to protect reefs, etc)
- Adoption of organic vegetable farming, hydroponics and aquaponics, and the use of scrap food for fertilizer
- Waste reduction, including reducing the use of plastics and packaging, recycling (e.g. using bottle crushers to recycle glass for pathways), and reusing waste cooking oil for fuel purposes e.g. heating
- Energy conservation through switching to LED lights; installing solar water heaters (for guest rooms and laundry facilities); and better energy management (e.g. turning off boilers at night).

Whilst there was no clear definition of biodiversity programs, examples such as creating Ra'ui sites / Community Conservation Areas (CCAs); coral garden projects; improved wastewater management; ecotourism projects and sponsored species conservation projects were provided.

1.5 Report Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide R2R and its implementation partners with:

1. An assessment of the extent to which tourism businesses are implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines developed through the project and included in the national accreditation system (SRF 21)
2. An assessment of the extent to which biodiversity conservation has been achieved through biodiversity conservation projects implemented by tourism operators (SRF 22)
3. An assessment of suitability, adequacy and relevance of the indicators and targets and the mechanisms use to achieve them; and
4. Recommendations to strengthen the approach to enable tourism activities to support biodiversity in the context of the R2R and national priorities.



David Kirkland

1.6 Method of Analysis

Information and data were acquired and analysed as follows:

- the national strategic framework for the Cook Islands tourism sector was reviewed to understand the legislative and policy framework for sustainable tourism development, and the nation's biodiversity and conservation priorities
- research relating to the characteristics of the Cook Islands' tourism sector and the existing accreditation programmes to determine the context for the R2R indicators and targets
- benchmarking of other certification schemes to assess the extent to which the current approach to accreditation aligns with global standards for sustainable tourism (biodiversity); and to consolidate feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach and areas of improvement.

A qualitative research survey was used to gather insights from tourism businesses about the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme and the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programme. The survey focused on the businesses' assessment of the programmes against a set of identified measurement criteria. The aim was to gather detailed information to assess the adequacy of the programme in meeting the R2R SRF indicators and targets and provide an indicative snapshot of the benefits and challenges of the current framework.

There were 393 tourism operators registered with CIT and the survey was issued to all CIT members. The survey period was from 8 - 22 May 2020.

The survey was promoted through various channels including on the Mana Tiaki website, CIT weekly EDM, the Cook Islands Tourism weekly TV news slot & social media.

A total of 142 survey responses were received. Of this total 41 surveys were submitted as incomplete and therefore could not be assessed. A total of 99 surveys were analysed.

Interviews were conducted with R2R project managers, Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, and Te Ipukarea Society (TIS). The primary focus of consultation was to gather information on the history and status of the certification system, including the evolution of the program over the past few years. The interviews supported the initial framing of this analysis and the development of the surveys described above.



1.7 Structure of the Report

This report is structured as follows:

SECTION 1

Describes the project background, aims, scope and method of analysis

SECTION 2

Describes the strategic framework for the sustainable management of tourism activities and biodiversity and conservation in the Cook Islands.

SECTION 3

Assesses the adequacy of the Cook Islands Quality Assurance and the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programmes in meeting the R2R indicators and targets.

SECTION 4

Describes the extent to which biodiversity conservation projects have been implemented by tourism operators as per the R2R indicator and targets

SECTION 5

Assesses the Cook Islands tourism accreditation framework against global sustainable tourism standards and international frameworks. It uses case studies to identify opportunities to strengthen the approach of the Cook Islands tourism industry for biodiversity conservation.

SECTION 6

Provides a SWOT analysis, key learnings and recommendations for R2R indicators and targets and strengthening the certification framework to support biodiversity conservation in the Cook Islands.





Young girls swimming in Rarotonga wearing pareo (sarong) and ei katu (flower head dress), David Kirkland

2 Strategic Framework

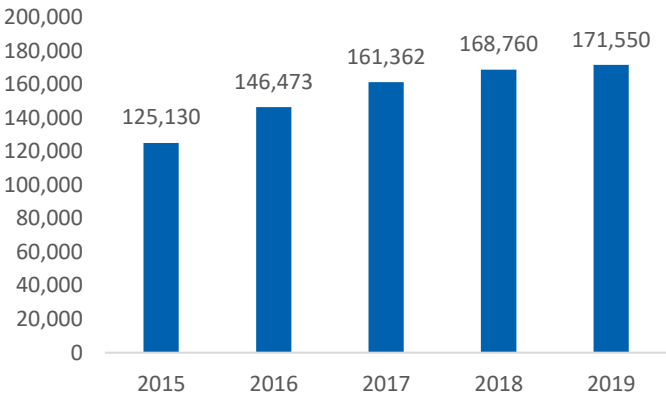
This section describes the strategic framework for the sustainable management of tourism activities and biodiversity and conservation in the Cook Islands.

2.1 Tourism to the Cook Islands

The tourism industry is the key driver for economic growth in the Cook Islands, contributing over 70% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). 171,550 visitors travelled to the Cook Islands in 2019, representing a 37% increase in visitors since 2015 (Figure 1).

Tourism activities contribute millions of dollars to the Cook Islands economy and rely on healthy ecosystems. The tourism sector is a significant consumer of water, land and coastal resources and can potentially impact on coastal and lagoon ecosystems, including destruction of coastal habitat and sedimentation of lagoons (through construction), pollution of lagoon environments (including waste systems and sources such as detergents), and damage to critical habitats (e.g. damage to coral reefs from boat anchors and snorkelers/divers).

Figure 1. Total Visitor Arrivals 2015 – 2019



Meet friendly locals at every turn, Aitutaki, David Kirkland

2.2 Cook Islands Legislative, Policy and Planning Framework

Legislation, policy, programmes, initiatives, and tools aimed at sustainable development and resource management can directly and indirectly affect the relationship between tourism and biodiversity. The targets and indicators for the R2R project are to be achieved within the context of legislative, policy and planning framework of the Cook Islands.



Birdwatching on Atiu Island, David Kirkland

2.3 National Sustainable Development Plan

Te Kaveinga Nui, National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 – 2020 articulates the development outcomes desired by Cook Islanders. The plan contains sixteen goals for economic, social, cultural, and environmentally sustainable growth. The NSDP identifies the interdependence of the development goals, and the importance of effective collaboration between agencies and partners across all sectors to successfully achieve the vision. The goals are closely aligned to the regional and international commitments such as the Pacific Regional Framework and the Global Sustainable Development Goals.

Several goals specifically relate to the sustainable practices (water, waste, and energy) and environmental protection and biodiversity of terrestrial and marine ecosystems:

- Goal 3: Promote sustainable practices and effectively manage solid and hazardous waste
- Goal 4: Sustainable management of water and sanitation
- Goal 6: Improve access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, modern energy and transport
- Goal 11: promote sustainable land use, management of terrestrial ecosystems, and protect biodiversity
- Goal 12: Sustainable management of oceans, lagoons and marine resources

The Report on NSDP Indicators⁷ Year Two Report – 2018 indicates mixed results regarding performance against achieving the goals. Of particular relevance to this project are the ‘areas identified as being of most concern’; these relate to waste management and recycling (Goal 3), the extent of biodiversity loss and the state of wetland areas (Goal 11) particularly on Rarotonga, where the development pressures are greatest, and lagoon water quality and the state of the reef, as measured by coral coverage (Goal 12).

⁷ Report on NSDP Indicators Year Two Report – 2018, Government of the Cook Islands 2018

2.4 Cook Islands Tourism Policy

Framework & Goals

The Sustainable Tourism Development Policy Framework (STDPF) presents policies and related indicators to measure the progress towards achieving sustainable tourism development. The STDPF is influenced by the NSDP and contains seven tourism goals.

1. Ensure strong governance, leadership, and management
2. Perpetuate the strong essence of the Cook Islands culture
3. Develop a strong and sustainable workforce and provide career pathways and employment opportunities for the Cook Islands people
4. Ensure the protection of the pristine environment through sustainable practices
5. Adopt a yield driven approach to tourism development – optimising sustainable economic outcomes
6. Adopt marketing and destination development strategies that promote the unique products and experiences of the Cook Islands in a way that drives sustainable outcomes
7. Ensure the health, safety, and security of all visitors.



The STDPF recognises certification as an important tool to improve environmental performance of the tourism industry through improved waste management, water conservation and energy efficiency. The STDPF includes a monitoring and evaluation framework which includes the following indicators for environmental sustainability and biodiversity and conservation projects

- % of industry accredited
- % of businesses with water conservation measures
- % of tourism enterprises engaged in waste minimization including education
- Strengthening local program/ initiatives to enhance the environment (Vaka Pride program)

In 2018 the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation contracted Te Ipukarea Society (TIS), a local NGO, to develop and manage the eco-tourism certification scheme known as Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Scheme (MTEC). The Ridge to Reef project funded TIS to establish and manage MTEC, with the aim of ensuring criteria that supported biodiversity and conservation projects were included in the assessment criteria. TIS works closely with the National Environment Service on biodiversity and biosecurity issues, and with the Office of the Prime Minister in promoting natural solutions for building climate change resilience. TIS is an important partner in species conservation plans, public outreach and education programmes.

2.5 The Cook Islands Tourism

Sector

The profile of tourism businesses is an important consideration when it comes to environmental engagement and sustainability. For example, owner-operators of small tourism businesses can be less likely to take up certification and undertake biodiversity programs due to perceived cost or lack of tangible benefit when compared to their larger counterparts. The Cook Islands Business Survey and Confidence Index⁸ provides some useful insight to the profile of tourism businesses and the challenges and the opportunities that exist within the sector:

- Most tourism businesses in Cook Islands are small to medium enterprises and owner operated. Most survey respondents (43%) were in the accommodation sector and 10% operated a 'Restaurant/café/bar' and another 8% of businesses offered 'visitor activities/tours'.
- Of survey respondents that provide visitor activities, two-fifths (40%) provide guided tours (water-based activities) and one fifth (20%) offer "tour/transport service", "guided tours-land based activities", and "charter boat-fishing".

One third of survey respondents indicated that limited human resources and skills availability are a key challenge to their business. Other challenges included competition from other businesses (27%), political issues and regulations (19%), operating cost (15%), tourists and tourism-like seasonality (15%), climate change/environmental degradation (12%), and infrastructure (12%).

Survey respondents also indicated that product development, marketing, tourism growth and tourist numbers, especially high yield tourists, represent the major opportunity for business growth in the coming five years.

Identified training needs include basic customer service, Kia Orana Values/Service courses and environmental awareness.

Visitor Perception of the Cook Islands Environment

Visitor satisfaction is also an important driver for sustainable tourism, biodiversity and conservation. The annual visitor perception survey of the Cook Islands reflects the importance of environmental sustainability⁹ in sustaining tourism growth. For example, 46% of visitors survey said that the most appealing element of the Cook Islands is the environment. Cleanliness and rubbish and environmental care was mentioned by 7% of respondents as the least appealing element of their visit. When asked to expand on these issues, many comments focus on the degradation of coral reefs, rubbish, poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, especially Muri Lagoon, broken glasses, and threatened marine life.


⁸ New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology September 2019

⁹ Cook Islands Visitor Survey, Annual Report, July 2018 – June 2019 New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology, October 2019

Figure 2. Overview of Cook Islands Business Economy 2018

COOK ISLANDS BUSINESS ECONOMY 2019



52% of businesses have been operating for more than **10 YEARS** 

All businesses operate all year round



48% businesses surveyed noted 'ACCOMMODATION PROVIDER' as their primary focus



18% businesses surveyed noted 'VISITOR ACTIVITIES/TOURS' as their primary focus



52% of the businesses surveyed attribute more than

90% of their annual turnover directly to the tourism industry



Respondents **STRONGLY AGREE** with the statement that

"THE NATIONAL ECONOMY DEPENDS HEAVILY ON THE TOURISM INDUSTRY"

(4.7 OUT OF 5)



"MAXIMISING VISITOR SPEND"

is ranked as a very important factor to focus on at a national scale **(4.5 OUT OF 5)**

12% of respondents mentioned **climate change/environmental degradation** as being a major challenge their business will face in the next 5 years



Source: Cook Islands Business Survey Report and Confidence Index, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology September 2019

Figure 3. Overview of Cook Islands Visitor Economy

COOK ISLANDS VISITOR ECONOMY 2019



171,550 Total Visitor Arrivals



The average local **SPEND** per visitor during the entirety of their stay is

NZ\$1,228

Visitors Arrival by Age Group



15-24 years old: **19,563**

25-34 years old: **31,325**

Visitor Arrival by Purpose of Visit



Visit Friends or Relatives

13,889



Wedding & Honeymoon

18,610



Vacation

128,921



61% of those surveyed are first time visitors

23% have visited two or three times before

21% visited Aitutaki



The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is

8.3 NIGHTS

93%

of visitors indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands in the future



97%

would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family



The **MOST APPEALING** elements are

ENVIRONMENT CLEANLINESS AND WEATHER

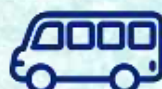
46%



The **LEAST APPEALING** elements are

LACK OF PUBLIC SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

17%



Also mentioned as a **LEAST APPEALING** element was

RUBBISH AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT CARE

7%



Source: Cook Islands Business Survey Report and Confidence Index, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology September 2019

2.6 Cook Islands National Tourism

Accreditation Scheme

The Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council (CITIC) currently manages the national tourism accreditation programme (the Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme) in collaboration with the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation. CITIC members are required to be accredited to be a member of CITIC .

The Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme promotes minimum standards across ten tourism business areas:

1. Land Tours
2. Accommodation
3. Food and Beverage
4. Marine tours
5. Retail
6. Professional Services
7. Health and Beauty
8. Transport
9. Weddings and Events
10. Charters

Businesses are required to complete the self-assessment checklist against a range of criteria specifically relevant to each of the ten business areas. Universal criteria relating to environmental sustainability such as waste, energy and water are applied to all businesses (Table 2).

An inspection by an independent auditor occurs every two years. All new businesses must be fully compliant before accreditation will be approved.

Once certified, businesses are offered the following benefits

- Tourism Corporation website inclusion
- Usage of accreditation logos
- Benefits from accreditation brand promotion

- Representation on Tourism Corporation road show
- Representation at CI Visitor Information Centres (domestic and international)
- Inclusion in the annual wholesaler return
- Tourism Corporation supported advertising
- Eligibility to benefit from industry sponsored training/seminars
- Tourism Industry Council full membership eligibility
- Eligibility for Tourism Awards entry
- Eligibility for inclusion in Tourism Corporation supported Wholesaler programs
- Eligibility to participate in official visiting Agent/Media familiarisations.

Table 2. Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme - Universal Environmental Criteria

2.1	Sewerage system is compliant to regulations
2.2	Building constructed compliant to regulations
2.3	Rubbish is collected, separated, and disposed of correctly for recycling
2.4	Energy conservation programme is in place and communicated to guests
2.5	Water conservation programme is in place and communicated to guests



2.7 Mana Tiaki Eco Certification

Scheme

Applicants must be certified with Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme before they can apply to become certified with MTEC. The additional fee for eco certification starts at \$130 for most businesses, and accommodation businesses may be required to pay an additional fee based on their size. Note that the fee was waived in the first 12 months of operation to encourage businesses to achieve eco certification. Due to the impact of Covid – 19 on tourism businesses, the fee waiver period has been extended.

Businesses are required to undertake the self-assessment checklist against the criteria outlined in Table 3. The applicants are required to obtain a minimum of 100 points (including bonus points offered to applicants when they undertake new or innovative biodiversity conservation projects). An inspection by an independent auditor occurs every two years. All new businesses must be fully compliant before accreditation will be approved. The programme uses international auditors to undertake the assessment process.

Once accredited, the Mana Tiaki Accreditation Scheme logo can be displayed on the premises and the business website. Accredited members are also promoted through the MTEC website. Ongoing training opportunities are also provided.

The MTEC standards complement the Cook Islands Quality Assurance criteria and promote a higher level of minimum standards for environmental sustainability as follows:

1. Water and Sanitation
2. Biodiversity
3. Solid waste
4. Energy
5. Miscellaneous Ecosystem

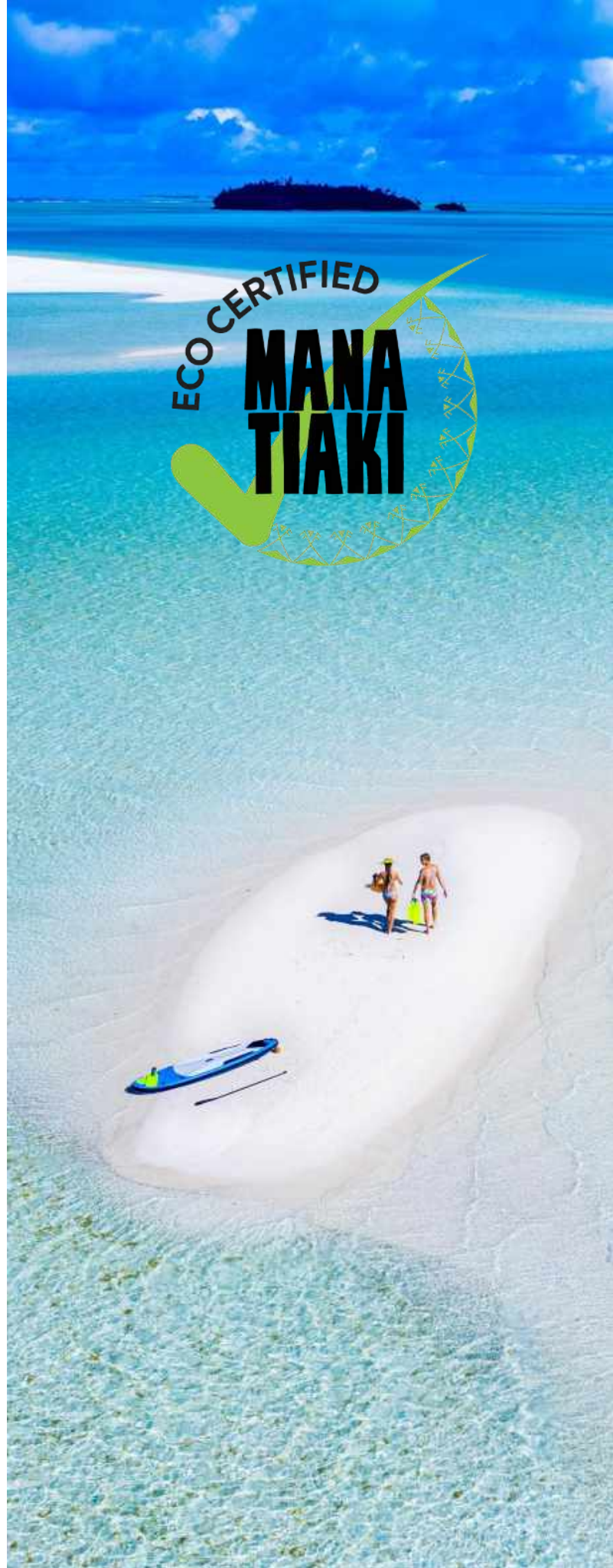


Table 3. Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Criteria

Focus area	Points	Code	Assessment Criteria
Water and Sanitation (25 total points possible)	5	WS1.1	Water consumption is measured and reading records kept
	5	WS1.2	Water reduction/reticulation/reuse techniques are in place
	5	WS1.3	There are written plans with water reduction and usage goals
	5	WS1.4	Alternative system to septic tank in place (eg composting toilet)
	5	WS1.5	Biodegradable cleaning and guest amenities products are used on equipment, toilet and greywater systems
Biodiversity (30 total points possible)	5	BD1.1	Native and endemic plants have been used widely in landscaping and sourced from only sustainable sources
	5	BD1.2	Business does not use inorganic (chemical) fertilisers or weed killers
	5	BD1.3	Plants have been selected for their ability to prevail in anticipated conditions eg drought, cyclone
	5	BD1.4	Care is taken to ensure harmful invasive species are not prevalent on site
	5	BD1.5	The organisation demonstrates awareness of areas with high biodiversity value
	5	BD1.6	Care is taken to promote biodiversity friendly products eg oxybenzone free sunscren
	5	BD1.7	Signage, staff interaction or room information shows plants, birds, fish and/ or areas of interest to guests
Solid Waste (50 total points possible)	5	WM1.1	A waste audit has been conducted in the last 24 months
	5	WM1.2	Specific waste sorting and disposal actions have been implemented in line with current guidelines from NES/WATSAN
	5	WM1.3	Programme in place to minimise single use packaging and non-recyclable materials
	3	WM1.4	Organic waste from staff is reused (eg compost, farm animal feed)
	5	WM1.5	Separate containers provided for customers organic waste to be disposed of separately to general waste (compost or pigs)
	5	WM1.6	Burning of man-made materials from the property is prohibited at all times
	5	WM1.7	Burning of green waste is prohibited
	7	WM1.8	Innovation is used to minimise waste production from customers and staff eg providing cloth bags, reusable coffee cups, refillable water bottles
	5	WM1.9	Environmentally friendly building materials, furnishings and techniques have been used in the development of the property or any refurbishments
	5	WM1.1	Guidance is given to customers and staff on minimising waste
Energy	5	EE1.1	Renewable energy sources are used on site for water heating

Focus area	Points	Code	Assessment Criteria
(30 total points possible)	5	EE1.2	Renewable energy sources are used on site for generating electricity
	3	EE1.3	There are written plans, with energy usage and consumption goals
	3	EE1.4	Measures are taken to make the best use of natural lighting
	5	EE1.5	Measures are taken to ensure the best use of natural airflow/cooling/heating
	3	EE1.6	Energy efficient vehicles are used
	3	EE1.7	Steps are taken to encourage transport methods for customers that do not rely on fossil fuels (eg public transport, bicycles, electric vehicles)
	3	EE1.8	Measures are taken to prevent unnecessary power usage (eg key card for lighting, air conditioning)
Misc Ecosystem (50 total points possible)	4	ES1.1	Visitors are provided with information about protecting the places they visit
	3	ES1.2	Environmentally responsible behaviour is encouraged among visitors
	4	ES1.3	Business plan includes environmental and social responsibility elements
	5	ES1.4	Management staff are aware of environmental efforts and policies and can communicate these to customers
	5	ES1.5	The business is a member of TIS Mana Tiaki programme (either coin donation or checkout/booking fee or both)
	5	ES1.6	A percentage of profits is donated to local conservation initiatives
	4	ES1.7	A priority is given to using local food sources over imported goods
	3	ES1.8	Environmental policy and initiatives are promoted on property website
	5	ES1.9	The company has a policy of favouring environmentally friendly/ other eco certified businesses or suppliers
	5	ES1.10	Implementation of alternative cleaning and/or laundry systems that eliminate or reduce the need for harmful chemicals
	3	ES1.11	Business has plans in place to reduce impacts of climate change on their property/customer experience
	4	ES1.12	Job descriptions are written to include environmental requirements of staff and performance measured against these
Bonus Points		B1.1	Please inform us below of additional initiatives your business may be undertaking. An additional point will apply for each new/innovative concept.
<p>Total points gained criteria out of 185:</p> <p>Total bonus points gained:</p> <p>Total points overall:</p> <p>Mana Tiaki Eco Certified: Y/N</p>			

2.8 Comparison of R2R Criteria with MTEC Criteria

The criteria suggested by the R2R project (refer Section 1) were adapted and included into the MTEC system as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. MTEC Criteria developed in response to R2R requirements

R2R Suggested Criteria	MTEC Criteria
Measures to reduce negative impacts on sensitive habitat, such as wastewater treatment systems (e.g. primary and secondary filters) and the use of eco-friendly laundry detergent;	WS 1.1 - 1.5
Adoption of biodiversity friendly practices (whale watching guidelines; boat anchoring to protect reefs, etc.).	No specific criteria however bonus points would be achieved for biodiversity friendly practices
Development using biodiversity friendly infrastructure	WM 1.9
Implementation and/or sponsorship of at least one biodiversity conservation related project by a tourism operator implementation and/or sponsorship of at least one BD conservation related project by a tourism operator	ES 1.6 and Bonus Points
Adoption of organic vegetable farming, hydroponics and aquaponics, and the use of scrap food for fertilizer	WM 1.4 and WM 1.5
Waste reduction, including reducing the use of plastics and packaging, recycling (e.g. using bottle crushers to recycle glass for pathways), and reusing waste cooking oil for fuel purposes	WM 1.1 - WM1.11
Energy conservation through switching to LED lights; installing solar water heaters (for guest rooms and laundry facilities); and better energy management (e.g. turning off boilers at night).	EE1.1 - EE1.8

2.9 Summary

Cook Islands has experienced a 37% increase in visitors since 2015. The tourism industry is the key driver for economic growth in the Cook Islands, contributing over 70% of its GDP and one of the key threats to biodiversity and conservation. The annual visitor perception survey of the Cook Islands reflects the importance of environmental sustainability¹⁰ in sustaining tourism growth.

Recent environmental indicators suggest that areas of concern are waste management, biodiversity loss, lagoon water quality and the state of the reef.

There is increased emphasis on the importance of sustainable tourism with a focus on yield and value over the volume of visitors. Te Kaveinga Nui, National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 – 2020 and the Sustainable Tourism Development Framework provide the strategic planning context for sustainable tourism. Strengthening the certification criteria relating to biodiversity conservation is the principal mechanism for achieving this aim and is recognised in both plans.

Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council play an important role in mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the operations and practices of the tourism industry to reduce the impact on biodiversity. This is not without its challenges as the tourism sector is made up of over 350 small and medium enterprises, with an annual turnover of less than NZ\$150,000 each.

The Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme provides a minimum industry standard across a range of areas. It is membership based and voluntary. There are many tourism businesses who choose not to be members of the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council and not certified under the Quality Assurance Programme.

MTEC provides a level of eco certification for businesses wanting to achieve higher levels of environmental sustainability. The scheme has been successful in incorporating the suggested criteria from the R2R program.

The following section provides an assessment of the adequacy of the program in meeting the R2R SRF 21 Indicator and End of Project Target.



¹⁰ Cook Islands Visitor Survey, Annual Report, July 2018 – June 2019 New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology, October 2019



Paddleboarding at One Foot Island, Aitutaki, David Kirkland

3 Achieving biodiversity outcomes through tourism certification

This section assesses the adequacy of the Cook Islands Quality Assurance and the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programmes in meeting the R2R indicators and targets.

3.1 Number and Type of Mana Tiaki

Eco certified businesses

In 2019 there were 393 tourism operators registered with CIT and certified with the Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation and Quality Assurance Programme. Note there are many other businesses that are not registered with CIT. The following analysis refers to businesses registered with CIT.

Of the 393 businesses registered with CIT, only 41 businesses had achieved Mana Tiaki Eco Certification in 2019 (10%). Of this total, 35 businesses were accommodation providers (85%), 5 were tour and activity providers (12%) and one business is a travel agency.

The number and type of businesses that are Mana Tiaki certified is significantly limited when compared to the number and type of businesses that participate in the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme. For example, of the 139 accommodation businesses registered with CIT, only 35 (25%) were Mana Tiaki certified. Of the 68 businesses offering tours and activities, only 5 were Mana Tiaki certified (7%). These results show that there are many businesses undertaking activities in the Cook Islands, including within the CIMP Marae Moana that are not eco certified. There are no food and beverage, retail or transport businesses that are currently Mana Tiaki Certified. Refer Table 5 and Appendix 1 for further analysis.

Figure 4. CIT accredited tourism operators - Cook Islands Quality Assurance and Mana Tiaki Eco Certified

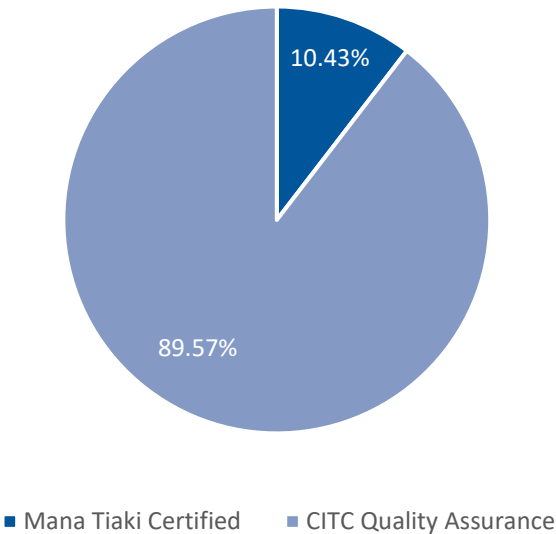
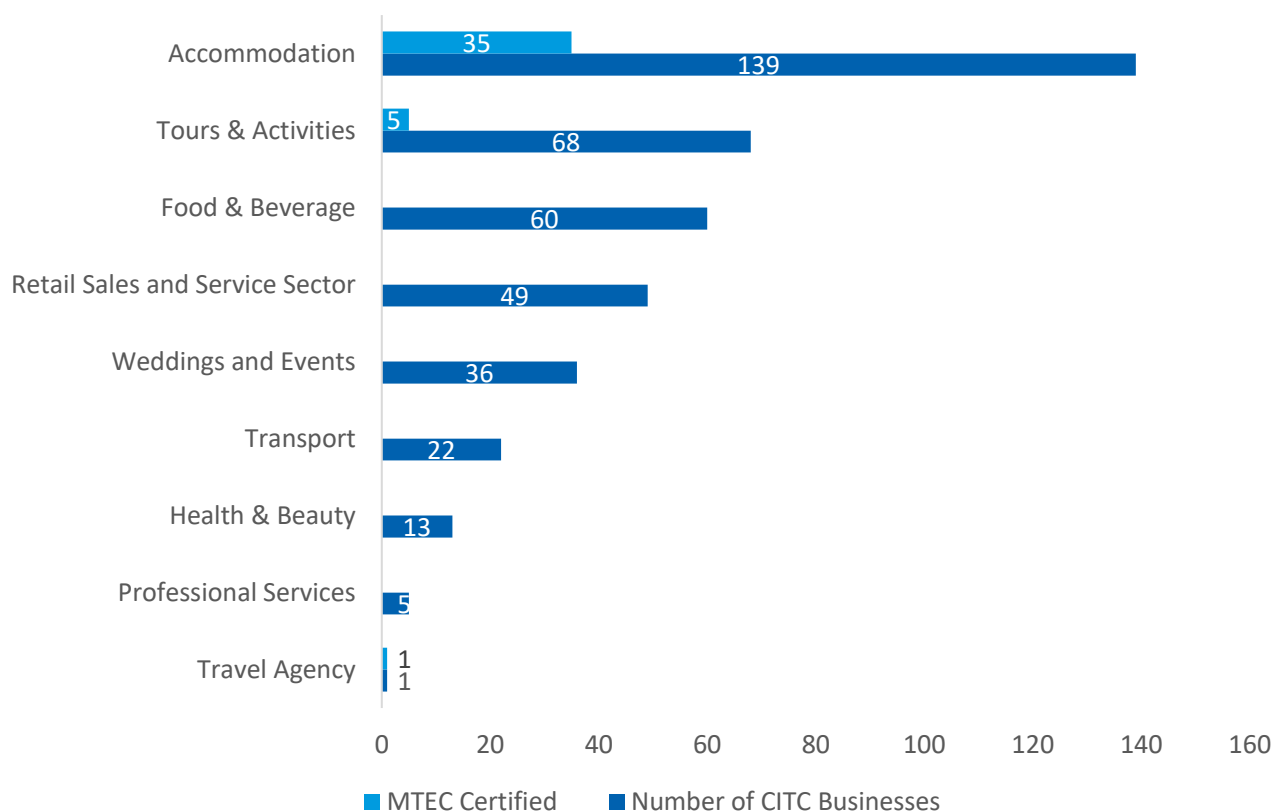


Table 5. Number and Type of Tourism Operators 2019

Type	Cook Islands Quality Assurance (number)	% of Total Businesses Quality Assurance	Mana Tiaki Eco Certification (number)	% of Total Businesses MTEC Certified 2019	% of total CIT Business MTEC Certified 2019
Weddings and Events	36	9%	0	0	0
Accommodation	139	35%	35	85	25%
Food & Beverage	60	15%	0	0	0
Health & Beauty	13	3%	0	0	0
Tours & Activities	68	17%	5	12	7%
Professional Services	5	1%	0	0	0
Retail Sales and Service Sector	49	12%	0	0	0
Transport	22	6%	0	0	0
Travel Agency	1	0.25%	1	3	100%
TOTAL	393	100%	41	100%	10.43%

Figure 5. Total number of accredited tourism operators - CITA vs MTEC



3.2 Survey of Cook Islands Tourism

Businesses

A qualitative research survey was used to gather insights from tourism businesses about the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme and the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Programme. The survey focused on the businesses’ assessment of the programmes against a set of identified measurement criteria. It aimed to gather detailed information to assess the adequacy of the programme in meeting the R2R SRF indicators and targets and provide an indicative snapshot of the benefits and challenges of the current framework.

The survey was issued to all businesses who were members of CIT. Most survey respondents were accommodation providers (57), visitor activity and tour providers (9), food and beverage operators (6) and retail sales and services (5). A copy of the survey and a full summary of the survey responses is included in Appendix 2.

Business Profile

The business type and size of the business often have significant implications for how businesses perceive, plan and implement sustainable business practices and certification. Interestingly the higher turnover the more likely the business is to be certified with Mana Tiaki. For example, 42% (13 respondents) of Mana Tiaki certified operators reported an annual turnover between NZ\$200,000 and NZ\$1 million, compared to 34% (18 responses) of non-certified operators. Notably, 65% (20 responses) of the Mana Tiaki certified businesses have been operating for over ten years and 35% (11 responses) had been operating for less than ten years.

Location of Businesses

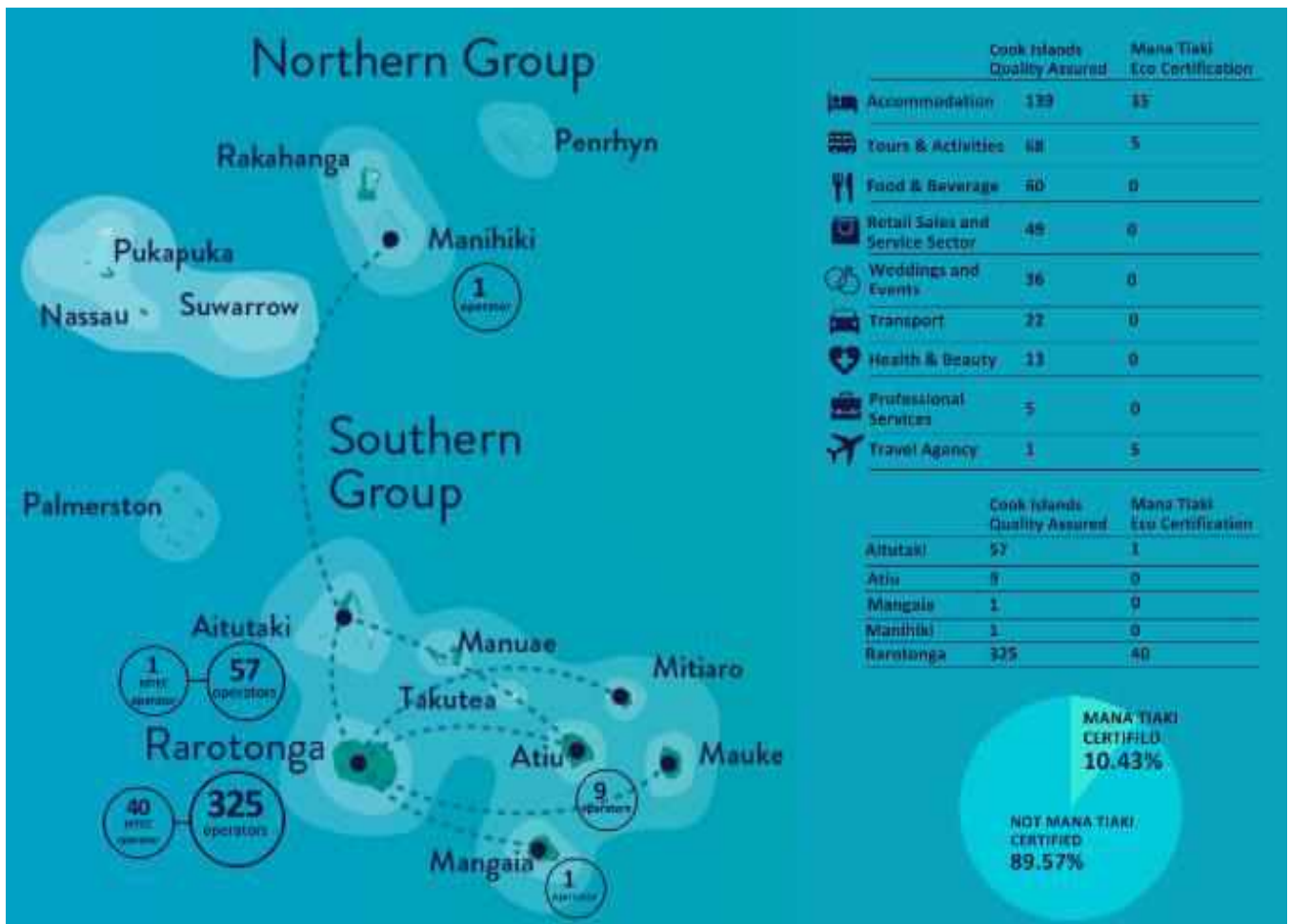
Of the survey respondents, most businesses certified with the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme are in Rarotonga and Aitutaki with a small number located on Atiu, Mangaia and Manihiki. The majority of MTEC certified operators who responded to the survey were based in Rarotonga, with one operator based in Aitutaki.

Table 6. Location of businesses

Island	Cook Islands Quality Assurance Operators	Mana Tiaki certified operators
Aitutaki	57	1
Atiu	9	
Mangaia	1	
Manihiki	1	
Rarotonga	325	40



Figure 6. Location of Tourism Businesses in the Cook Islands 2019



Source: Map - Cook Islands Tourism <https://cookislands.travel/au>

Essential Factors Impacting on Environmental Sustainability

When asked to rank the importance of a range of factors impacting on the environmental sustainability of their business, most respondents ranked the following factors as **essential** (ranked in order of priority)

1. Reducing waste from operations
2. Reducing energy use in operations
3. Reducing water usage
4. Protecting and contributing to culture and heritage

For Mana Tiaki certified operators reducing waste and energy use were essential factors with sustainable products in supply chain ranking 3rd, and managing business reputation by demonstrating sustainable operations ranking 4th.

Sustainable tourism activities undertaken

The survey also asked respondents to nominate three sustainable tourism activities or initiatives undertaken within their business. The following activities were nominated (in no order):

- Wetland rehabilitation
- Recycling programs
- Complimentary drinking bottles (aluminium) and shoulder bags for shopping (no plastic)
- Waste reduction and minimal use of single use plastics
- Coral transplant frames
- Energy reduction
- Eco bulk purchasing
- Waste water treatment
- Rainwater collection
- Electric vehicles
- Marine education activities
- Solar panels
- Composting green waste
- Beach clean ups
- Interpretation

There was no discernible difference in the type and number of activities nominated by Mana Tiaki certified businesses and the type of activities nominated by non-certified operators.

Impact of Mana Tiaki Eco Certification on business practices

The benefits that businesses can derive (and the subsequent positive effect on performance) from attaining Mana Tiaki eco certification are demonstrated by the survey results. When asked if business practices had changed because of applying for and receiving Mana Tiaki Eco Certification 33% (10) of respondents stated yes, 27% (8 responses) stated no and 40% (12 responses) stated that they had partially changed their business practices.

“Absolutely more conscious of best practice and useful having the helpful hints”

“Mana Tiaki informs decision making on reducing waste, recycling, best practices for water and energy reduction”

We received a very high score following independent assessment. It reinforces that what we are doing is good”



Perceived Benefits of Eco Certification

The Cook Islands Industry Accreditation Survey asked both Mana Tiaki certified businesses and non-certified businesses to identify the potential benefits of eco-certification. Most respondents (certified and non certified) indicated that the main benefits were the promotion of sustainable business practices in the Cook Islands, reduced costs due to energy efficiency and better waste management.

For those businesses certified with Mana Tiaki, the promotion of sustainable business practices in the Cook Islands, marketing benefit and improved business reputation were strong drivers. For the non-certified businesses, the promotion of sustainable business practices in the Cook Islands, reduced costs due to materials or waste efficiencies, and local community benefits were also strong drivers.

Table 7. Benefits of Eco Certification – Mana Tiaki Certified Businesses and Non Certified Businesses

Answer Choices	Total Responses	Certified	Not Certified
Reduced risk	41% 35	11	24
Promotion of sustainable business practices in the Cook Islands	87% 74	31	43
Helps local community	74% 63	24	39
Increased employee productivity	19% 16	4	12
Increased competitive advantage	49% 42	20	22
Improved ability to attract and retain staff	20% 17	6	11
Increased media exposure	41% 35	16	19
Reduced costs due to materials or waste efficiencies	72% 60	24	36
Marketing benefit	60% 51	26	25
Improved business reputation	68% 58	26	32
Better innovation of product/service offering	51% 43	18	25
Improved business processes	48% 41	17	24
Good corporate conscience	69% 59	25	34
Increased margins or market share	21% 18	8	10
Reduced costs due to energy efficiency, better waste management, water use etc	80% 67	25	42
Please share any other benefits you think are important	16% 11	1	10
	Answered 85		
	Skipped 14		

Actual Benefits of Mana Tiaki Eco Certification

When asked what actual business benefits have been experienced because of Mana Tiaki Eco Certification most respondents indicated good corporate conscience, followed by promotion of sustainable business practices, recognition by tourists, and increased marketing exposure.

Table 8. Actual Benefits of Mana Tiaki Certification

Answer choices (more than one answer)	%
Promotion of sustainable business practices in Cook Islands	63%
Increased marketing exposure	40%
Improved ability to attract and retain staff	10%
Increased margins or market share	10%
Increased competitive advantage	20%
Reduced costs due to energy efficiency	27%
Good corporate conscience	67%
Reduced costs due to materials or waste efficiencies	33%
Increased number of visitors	10%
Improved business processes	13%
Better innovation of product/service offering	17%
Increased employee productivity	7%
Recognition by tourists	43%
Improved business reputation	37%
Local community recognition	27%
There have not been any benefits	17%
Please tell us any other benefits you have experienced?	23%



3.3 Achieving Eco Certification standards

Of the respondents that were Mana Tiaki Certified the majority (63%) (19 responses) felt the existing standards were easy to achieve and 33% (10 responses) felt they were partly easy to achieve (Figure 7). Some comments indicated a desire for more stringent auditing, for example:

“No on site assessments are done, so fairly easy for one to tick a box, even without complying.”

“I feel that the bar is too low, the questions too open to interpretation and response. But, if these get tightened year on year as respondents improve that would be good.”

Several comments were also made about the lack of monitoring:

“Existing accreditation schemes are not efficiently monitored. Nobody properly checks what is being stated. Requirement for only some businesses to be accredited (ie. overseas investors) is discriminatory.”

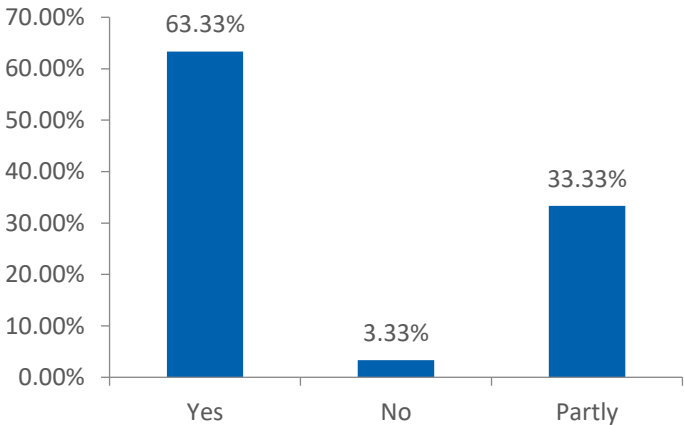
“We were doing it anyway but people can claim whatever they like, no one checks any claims.”

“Yes, because nobody check if operators are actually doing what they claim to be.”

“The standards are very easy to achieve. Maybe there should be an Elite level, for those operators that have additional projects on the go, rather than just meeting the basic standards.”

Interestingly, when businesses were asked if they thought the certification system was too easy and thereby reducing its value, the majority of respondents said no (50%) (15 responses), 20% (6 responses) said yes and 30% (9 responses) said somewhat.

Figure 7. Do you feel the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification standards are easy to achieve for operators?

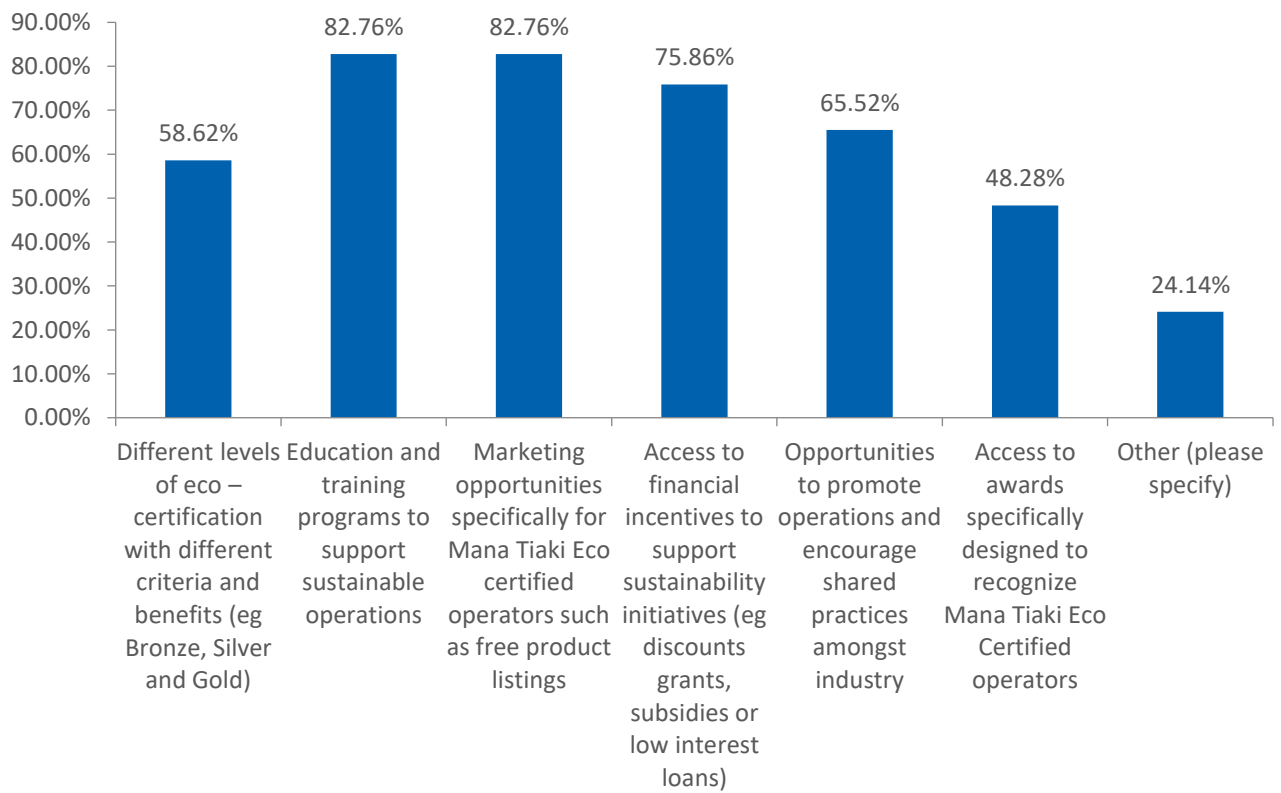


3.4 Strengthening the benefits of Mana Tiaki

When asked how the benefits of Mana Tiaki Eco Certification could be strengthened most certified businesses suggested:

- Marketing opportunities specifically for Mana Tiaki Eco certified operators such as free product listings
- Education and training programs to support sustainable operations
- Access to financial incentives to support sustainability initiatives (eg discounts, grants, subsidies or low interest loans)

Figure 8. Strengthening the benefits of Mana Tiaki Eco Certification

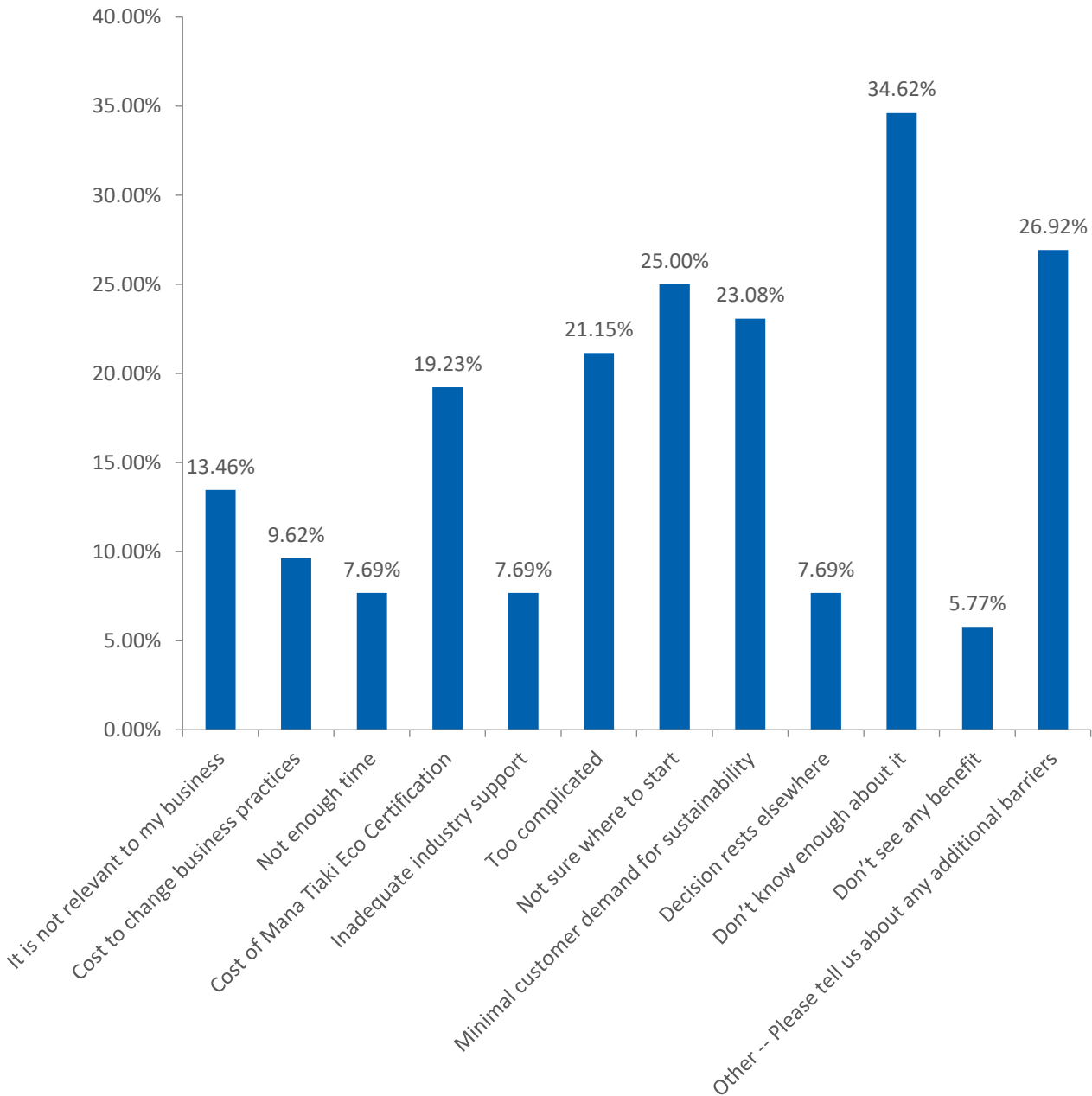


3.5 Barriers to achieving Mana Tiaki Eco-Tourism certification

The most common reason for not becoming Mana Tiaki certified was a lack of information: “don’t know enough about it” (35%) (18 responses) and “not sure where to start” (25%) (13 responses) or ‘minimal customer demand for sustainability’ (23%) (12 responses).

Other identified barriers were that the business was too small or they thought it related more to accommodation. Some businesses also stated that they were already doing a lot and did not need to become certified.

Figure 9. Barriers to becoming Mana Tiaki Eco Certified



3.6 Incentives

Access to grants, discounts and subsidies for sustainable tourism initiatives can be a powerful motivator. 75% (38 responses) of non-certified respondents stated that access to grants, discounts and subsidies would make them more likely to seek Mana Tiaki certification.

If they were able to secure funds for sustainable tourism initiatives, the immediate priorities identified to make the business more sustainable were:

- solar panels/solar power (26 responses)
- waste management systems (4)
- purchasing hybrid or e-vehicles (4)
- water conservation systems (4)

3.7 One system or two

When asked if the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Accreditation Program was to be revised to include additional sustainability criteria, would it help the business become more sustainable, (removing the need for a standalone eco-certification) almost half of non-certified businesses said yes and the majority of certified businesses said no.

Some operators felt that the eco certification process was a duplication of effort. For example:

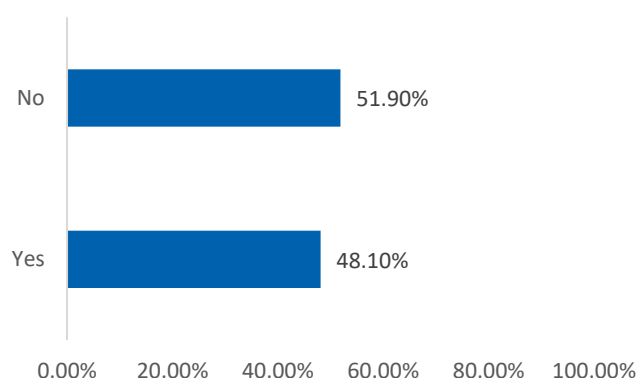
“Break the link to the CITIC accreditation. That is of no benefit to us (time, cost, no value) but we had to become accredited to get to this certification.”

“Could it be built into the Tourism Accreditation Program. Is there a risk of having too many programs for a small island community - is this duplication?”

3.8 Mandatory Eco Certification

Respondents were almost evenly split on whether eco certification should be compulsory or not, with 48% (38 responses) believing it should be and 51% (41 responses) believing it should not be.

Figure 10. Mandatory Eco Certification



Other comments about sustainable tourism and Mana Tiaki Eco Certification

There were more comments that could be characterised as positive than negative, and some specific comments about programme management. The need for more promotion of the scheme, as well as promotion of the businesses involved, was a common theme.



3.9 Key Findings

The establishment of the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Program has had a positive influence on the tourism industry’s environmental performance.

In 2019, 41 businesses were accredited with MTEC and they were implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines recommended by R2R and included in the national accreditation system. The target for R2R SRF 21 has been achieved.

Three out of four Mana Tiaki eco certified businesses indicate that they have changed or partly changed their business practices, which is a measurable indicator that the Mana Tiaki eco certification program has contributed to the R2R Strategic Results Framework Project Outcome 2: Effective mainstreaming of biodiversity in key sectors to mitigate threats within production landscapes.

Table 9. R2R SRF 21

	SRF #	Indicator	End of Project Target	End of Project Assessment
The Cook Islands national tourism accreditation system	21	Impact of tourism businesses on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in targeted key biodiversity areas (KBAs)	At least 20 tourism businesses are implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with conservation guidelines developed through the project and included in the national accreditation system.	As at December 2019, 41 businesses were implementing biodiversity management programs that comply with the conservation guidelines recommended by R2R and were included in the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification programme.



Issues and Opportunities

In order to strengthen the current approach to eco certification, the analysis points to a number of issues that require attention. These issues vary in scale and nature and relate broadly to the perceived benefits or positive effects of eco certification by the industry.

There is a high level of awareness regarding environmental sustainability across all businesses particularly relating to waste, water and energy. Many businesses are implementing a range of sustainable tourism activities supporting these priorities and see the benefits as the promotion of sustainable business practices in the Cook Islands, reduced costs due to energy efficiency and better waste management.

However, the take up eco certification across the sector is low and the type and location of businesses that are eco certified is underrepresented. Enterprises offering visitor activities and tour activities make up the second largest number of businesses (68 businesses) in the Cook Islands, however only five are eco certified. The nature and location of the activities that these businesses undertake are likely to have an impact on the biodiversity and conservation on the marine park Marae Moana. Encouraging these businesses to become eco certified should be considered a priority as they can actively contribute to the protection and management of the marine protected area. This can be achieved by providing tangible benefits to businesses such as preferred access to protected areas, longer permit periods and capacity to take greater number of visitors. These certification incentives are an important management tool for other marine protected areas and are used by the Great Barrier Marine Park Authority (refer Section 5.7).

The analysis demonstrates that there are many internal and external factors that prevent businesses from implementing sustainable business practices and achieving eco certification. The lack of time available due to the day-to-day management focus of small businesses, owner-operators' lack of familiarity

with the environmental and social consequences of their operations along with their perceived low levels of environmental awareness are all factors limiting the take up of eco certification for these businesses. The limited availability of information and advice to assist in the implementation of sustainable measures and a lack of financial resources available to invest in sustainability improvements are also significant barriers. Financial instruments such as government grants, tax concessions, and subsidies can act as incentives for businesses to take up eco-certification.

For those businesses with a strong interest in environmental sustainability, the existing standards with the MTEC system are considered easy to achieve and there is desire amongst some operators for stronger criteria and more stringent auditing.

The benefits of MTEC could be strengthened for businesses, particularly if certification provided access to financial incentives to support sustainability initiatives (eg discounts, grants, subsidies, or low interest loans). Marketing opportunities, education and training programs to support sustainable operations are also warranted. These tangible benefits are likely to act as an incentive for many businesses.

The survey results also indicate that strengthening existing, or providing additional, sustainability criteria would help businesses become more sustainable, (removing the need for a standalone eco-certification). Some operators felt that the eco certification process was a duplication of effort and one system would be preferred.

Whilst there seems to be some indifference as to whether eco certification should be compulsory or not amongst tourism operators in the Cook Islands, compulsory certification schemes that are not linked to tangible benefits for operators have limited success and politically unattainable. For eco certification to be successful it must be mutually beneficial for the tourism industry and government authorities.



The Kia Orana Aunties. Rarotonga, David Kirkland

4 BIODIVERSITY PROJECTS

This section describes the extent to which biodiversity conservation projects have been implemented by tourism operators as per the R2R indicator and targets

The previous section presented examples of tourism businesses that have a strong commitment to protection of the environment and biodiversity. They have supported conservation through their own land and resource management, funding, and engagement with visitors and communities. Others may be less proactive but still take account of biodiversity in the management of their businesses or in the suppliers that they use.

Some operators are supporting biodiversity conservation through specific projects. These are undertaken by MTEC certified businesses as well as other tourism businesses that are not eco certified. This section analyses the nature of these projects and the extent to which the indicator and target of at least 15 projects has been achieved. The mechanism to determine if the target has been achieved is mostly through a review of MTEC applications.

4.1 Defining projects that support biodiversity conservation

Engagement with tourism businesses to promote and undertake management actions and support conservation can take various forms. Examples of the most common activities¹¹ include:

- Checking on management and mitigation actions required of businesses as a condition of development approval
- Encouraging and supporting businesses in their own individual management and conservation initiatives

- Encouraging employees of tourism business to act as champions for biodiversity conservation in their communities
- Collecting rental and user fees from concessionaires and other businesses, with revenues used for conservation
- Imposing wider local management charges and taxes on businesses, where appropriate
- Creating and promoting specific opportunities for tourism businesses to sponsor local conservation projects or provide voluntary stewardship of areas
- Encouraging or requiring businesses to collect a fee from their visitors, for example on behalf of local communities to support their management and conservation activities or general welfare
- Encouraging well-designed tourism offers that enable voluntary participation by visitors in practical conservation work (“voluntourism”)
- Establishing active partnerships between local concessionaires or other businesses and local government or protected area authorities, to plan and undertake joint initiatives. Partnerships may also include NGOs and local community bodies.

4.2 Biodiversity Conservation Projects and Mana Tiaki Eco Certification

The Mana Tiaki program provides a minimum standard for ecosystem protection which addresses many of the examples identified above. Whilst all the minimum standards required by MTEC contribute to reducing the impact of tourism activities on biodiversity, the most relevant criteria are summarised in Table 10.

¹¹ Practical Guide for the Development of Biodiversity-based Tourism Products, World Tourism Organisation 2011

Table 10. Mana Tiaki Biodiversity Protection Criteria

Mana Tiaki Biodiversity Protection Criteria
Visitors are provided with information about protecting the places they visit
Environmentally responsible behaviour is encouraged among visitors
Business plan includes environmental and social responsibility elements
Management staff are aware of environmental efforts and policies and can communicate these to customers
The business is a member of TIS Mana Tiaki programme (either coin donation or checkout/booking fee or both)
A percentage of profits is donated to local conservation initiatives
A priority is given to using local food sources over imported goods
Environmental policy and initiatives are promoted on property website
The company has a policy of favouring environmentally friendly/ other eco certified businesses or suppliers
Implementation of alternative cleaning and/or laundry systems that eliminate or reduce the need for harmful chemicals
Business has plans in place to reduce impacts of climate change on their property/customer experience
Job descriptions are written to include environmental requirements of staff and performance measured against these



Many of MTEC certified businesses meet these criteria by offering education to visitors and staff about biodiversity in the Cook Islands. Several donate to conservation initiatives including Te Ipukarea Society either through having donation boxes or as corporate members.

In addition to meeting the minimum standard, an analysis of MTEC applications suggests that 14 MTEC businesses are supporting approximately 20 identifiable biodiversity projects as follows:

- Individual management and conservation initiatives such as plantings and weed control, water collection, storage and reticulation, and investing in solar power
- Donating or sponsoring TIS and other organisations to undertake local conservation projects
- Supporting and contributing to community conservation activities such as beach clean ups
- Encouraging or requiring visitors to donate to the local NGO (TIS), to support their management and conservation activities
- Joint initiatives such as support for the rau'i'i sites
- Direct conservation projects such as coral regenerations, Kakerori (Rarotonga Flycatcher) bird sanctuary, support with ship rat predator survey, reintroduction of the Kura (Rimatara Lorikeet) and eradication of the Indian mynah bird.
- Several scuba diving operators have paid for moorings around Rarotonga and Aitutaki to prevent damage to the reef from anchors
- One company offers scuba certification through the high school as a part of their schoolwork.
- Many MTEC members have either organised, participated or contributed in beach clean ups such as the World Ocean Day clean up of Muri Motu

A summary of the most notable programs and activities undertaken by businesses is presented in Table 11.



Love a little paradise - Local and tourists in a taro plantation., David Kirkland

Table 11. Notable Biodiversity Programs undertaken by Cook Islands tourism businesses and MTEC members¹²

Name of Business	Summary of Programs
Rarotongan Hotel	The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa is the guardian of the Aroa Lagoon Marine Sanctuary, declared by local traditional elders as a ra'ui well over a decade ago. The business cares for and supports management of the ra'ui by employing members of the landowner families to work within the hotel and monitor the ra'ui.
Pacific Divers	Pacific Divers is also a key supporter of the <u>Pacific Islands Conservation Initiative</u> . PICI runs the Cook Islands Turtle Project, Rubbish Round-up and several other projects. Pacific Divers contributes data to the turtle project and provides the office space and staff to run the project.
Atiu villas	Atiu Villas has developed a successful bird tour program. As part of the program, Atiu Villas provides free or discounted accommodation to field workers and scientists; in addition, Air Rarotonga provides free airfares to some field workers who are undertaking biodiversity related work in Atiu, including those working on eradicating the mynah bird.
Kitesup	KiteSUP works closely with R2R to help with the turtle surveying and contributes by providing R2R with data from tours. Guests take part in the survey to raise their awareness and understanding of turtles, their habitats and main threats. The business volunteers to plant string plants on the bottom of rocks at their site. They organised multiple beach clean ups in 2019.
Ariki Resort	Established a Turtle Education Centre to support the surveys of Hawksbill turtles, which are on the IUCN Red List as critically endangered, and work to protect them and their environment.
Dive Rarotonga	Reef Restoration program is underway, with collaboration from R2R and MMR, consisting of artificial reef build and positioning on seaward side of the northern reef. Collection of 'Corals of Opportunity' found on dives (broken fragments from anchor damage) are transplanted to artificial reef frames. Ongoing monitoring of growth or otherwise of collected samples is conducted. Opening site to other operators once established for tourists to see. There is potential for future duplication and expansion of initial pilot stage.
Turama Pacific Travel Group	Turama Pacific Travel Group have launched its own water bottling station at Turama House in Nikao which will see the inbound tourism company replace plastic water bottles with aluminium refillable bottles as part of the local company's 30-year policy on environmental conservation and sustainable tourism. Prior to this it was estimated to provide around 83,000 tourists a year with at least one disposable plastic water bottle. The aluminium bottles are expected to save approximately ¼ million plastic bottles per year, significantly contributing to the health of the environment and habitat availability for biodiversity.
Rarotonga brewery	Rarotonga Brewery provided a new system within the Cook Islands by offering refillable flagons, and refill or 'Swap & Go' stations located throughout the island in order to reduce waste produced from beer bottles, as recycling in the Cook Islands is difficult and relies on the costly exportation of such to other countries that can deal with it appropriately. In total, they have saved over 1 million glass bottles from entering our landfill since opening for business in 2016.
Ikurangi Eco Retreat	Ikurangi Eco Retreat use modern composting toilets and light footprint tents for accommodation.
Etu Moana Beach Villas	Support Vet-Trek, culling feral cats and de-sexing on Aitutaki and Bronze Member of Te Ipukarea Society

¹² Taken from MTEC applications and review of documentation

4.3 Survey Responses

In addition, the Cook Islands Tourism Accreditation Survey asked all respondents if their business was involved in or supported any biodiversity or conservation projects. Of the total 99 respondents, 34% of respondents confirmed that they were undertaking projects, consisting of 48% of MTEC certified businesses that stated yes, compared to 26% of non-certified operators who also confirmed they were undertaking projects. This would result in over 30 projects currently underway.

4.4 Future plans

When asked if the business was planning to undertake any biodiversity or conservation projects in the future, 48% confirmed that they would be undertaking projects, correlating to 41 tourism businesses. Of the MTEC certified operators, 68% indicated they were planning on undertaking projects, whereas only 38% of non-certified businesses said they were planning projects. Identified potential projects included:

- Wetland rehabilitation
- introduce a Raui by 2021.
- Bee hives and will train two staff to be bee keepers.
- Waste reduction and sewage disposal through tertiary systems
- Food security
- Seeding coral
- Sustainable planting
- Composting
- Solar power
- Supply of eco products
- Training in Cook Islands native flora and fauna.

4.5 Key findings

The establishment of the Mana Tiaki Eco Certification Program has had a positive influence on the tourism industry's support for biodiversity conservation projects. In 2019, of the 41 businesses accredited with MTEC, 14 were implementing or supporting approximately 20 identifiable biodiversity management programs. Other projects are likely to be supported or implemented by the non-certified businesses, however there is no accurate measure to confirm progress from this group. Notwithstanding, the target for R2R SRF 22 has been achieved.



4.6 Issues and Opportunities

Whilst the performance target and indicator has been reached, the indicator focuses solely on the number of projects, however the type, location and quality of the projects are also important indicators for biodiversity conservation.

Most survey respondents did not differentiate between biodiversity conservation projects and sustainable tourism activities and many businesses appear to have limited understanding of what types of projects would support biodiversity. Nine respondents to the survey

indicated a desire to be involved in a biodiversity project but lacked the knowledge about where to start and how to become involved. Information that identifies, directs, and coordinate their efforts is recommended.

Transparent, regular, and current monitoring and reporting on progress will help the sector understand whether it is supporting the Cook Islands and R2R biodiversity priorities. Progress reports also help stakeholders and contributors adjust their activities or approaches to improve results.

Table 12. R2R SRF 22

	SRF #	Indicator	End of Project Target	End of Project Assessment
Biodiversity conservation projects implemented by tourism operators.	22	# of projects by tourism operators that support biodiversity conservation (e.g. creating Ra’ui sites / CCAs; coral gardens; beach clean-up; sponsored species conservation)	At least 15 projects operating by the end of the project	As at December 2019, 14 businesses were implementing or supporting approximately 20 identifiable biodiversity management programs. This figure is likely to be higher. Thus this target has been achieved.





From farm to table. Local man pulls fresh Taro (similar to sweet potato) from his plantation on Rarotonga, David Kirkland

5 Global Benchmarking and Case Studies

This section assesses the Cook Islands tourism accreditation framework against global sustainable tourism standards and international frameworks. It uses case studies to identify opportunities to strengthen the approach of the Cook Islands tourism industry for biodiversity conservation.

5.1 Global Sustainable Tourism

Standards

To provide some clarity for the industry and consumers, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Foundation, and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) jointly prepared a voluntary set of Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (also known as standards) to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism for both industry operators and travellers.

These criteria are minimum requirements that any tourism business or destination should aspire to reach in order to protect and sustain the destination's natural and cultural resources, while ensuring tourism meets its potential as a tool for conservation and poverty alleviation consistent with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). These standards are the Global Sustainable Tourism Standards and are directly relevant to the Cook Islands approach to tourism accreditation.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is responsible for developing these global sustainable travel and tourism standards. It also acts as the international accreditation body for sustainable tourism certification. The GSTC reflect both the CBD Guidelines and the UNWTO Code of Ethics for Tourism, and collectively these provide a firm basis for implementation of sustainable tourism, including biodiversity and ecosystem service

components. The GSTC are organised around four main themes:

1. Effective sustainability planning and management
2. Maximizing social and economic benefits for the local community
3. Enhancing cultural heritage
4. Maximising benefits and reducing negative impacts to the environment.

The latter contains a specific subsection on conserving biodiversity, ecosystems, and landscapes, with specific considerations aimed at protecting wildlife species, avoiding introduction of invasive species, and ensuring that “the business contributes to the support of biodiversity conservation, including supporting natural protected areas and areas of high biodiversity value”. In addition, it contains a list of potential indicators for guiding biodiversity conservation.

The GSTC provide basic guidelines for tourism businesses of all sizes to become more sustainable, and to help destinations, governments and other stakeholders to formulate programmes for sustainable tourism.

The standards relate to:

- Industry: Hotels and Tour operators - for use by the accommodation sector and for businesses offering tours and activities
- Destinations - for use by public policymakers and destination managers

The standards are the minimum, not the maximum, which businesses, governments, and destinations should aim to achieve in order to approach social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability. The standards are presented in Appendix 3.

Since tourism destinations each have their own culture, environment, customs, and laws, the standards are designed to be adapted to local conditions and supplemented by additional criteria for the specific location and activity. Many public sector tourism policy-makers and destination managers use the standards for guidance in developing policy, raising awareness and conducting training, and for use as a framework for national or localised sustainability standards and certification schemes. The GSTC industry and destination standards are relevant to the Cook Islands tourism sector and other Pacific nations are also adopting them. For example, Vanuatu Tourism is using both the industry and destination standard to develop their own certification scheme. Niue is following the GSTC destination standard to achieve destination certification.

5.2 Comparing GSTC and MTEC environmental Criteria












Mana Tiaki Eco Certification standards consist of five sections: water & sanitation, biodiversity, solid waste, energy and ecosystem. These sections address *Section D: Maximize Benefits to the Environment and Minimise Negative Impacts* of the GSTC criteria. Out of the sixteen criteria points in GSTC Section D, MTEC only meets seven criteria points (Refer Table 13). The Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme only meets two criteria points out of the sixteen criteria points. CIQA & MTEC both have limited attention and coverage to biodiversity conservation and activities in protected areas.

The minimum standards of the MTEC and Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programmes do not address the GSTCs other criteria relating to Social and Economic, Sustainable Management and Cultural Heritage (Appendix 3).



Table 13. Comparison of GSTC and MTEC / Cook Islands Quality Assured Standards

Global Sustainable Tourism Council Minimum Standards Section D: Maximize Benefits to the Environment and Minimize Negative Impacts	Cook Islands Quality Assurance	Mana Tiaki Eco Certification
D1 Conserving resources		
D1.1 Environmentally preferable purchasing		
Purchasing policies favour environmentally sustainable suppliers and products, including capital goods, food, beverages, building materials and consumables.	✗	✓
D1.2 Efficient purchasing		
The organization carefully manages the purchasing of consumable and disposable goods, including food, in order to minimize waste.	✗	✗
D1.3 Energy conservation		
Energy consumption is measured by type and steps are taken to minimize overall consumption. The organization makes efforts to increase its use of renewable energy.	✓ Limited	✓
D1.4 Water conservation		
Water risk is assessed, water consumption is measured by type, and steps are taken to minimize overall consumption. Water sourcing is sustainable and does not adversely affect environmental flows. In areas of high water risk, context-based water stewardship goals are identified and pursued.	✓ Limited	✓
D2 Reducing pollution		
D2.1 Greenhouse gas emissions		
Significant greenhouse gas emissions from all sources controlled by the organization are identified, calculated where possible and procedures implemented to avoid or to minimize them. Offsetting of the organization's remaining emissions is encouraged.	✗	✗
D2.2 Transport		
The organization seeks to reduce transportation requirements and actively encourages the use of cleaner and more resource efficient alternatives by customers, employees, suppliers and in its own operations.	✗	✓
D2.3 Wastewater		
Wastewater, including grey water, is effectively treated and is only reused or released safely, with no adverse effects to the local population or the environment.	✗ Limited	✗
D2.4 Solid waste		
Waste, including food waste, is measured, mechanisms are in place to reduce waste and, where reduction is not feasible, to reuse or recycle it. Any residual waste disposal has no adverse effect on the local population or the environment.	✗	✓
D2.5 Harmful substances		

Global Sustainable Tourism Council Minimum Standards Section D: Maximize Benefits to the Environment and Minimize Negative Impacts	Cook Islands Quality Assurance	Mana Tiaki Eco Certification
The use of harmful substances, including pesticides, paints, swimming pool disinfectants, and cleaning materials, is minimized, and substituted when available by innocuous products or processes. All storage, use, handling, and disposal of chemicals are properly managed.		 Limited criteria under Biodiversity section
D2.6 Minimize pollution		
The organization implements practices to minimize pollution from noise, light, runoff, erosion, ozone-depleting substances, and air, water and soil contaminants.		
D3 Conserving biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes		
D3.1 Biodiversity conservation		
The organization supports and contributes to biodiversity conservation, including through appropriate management of its own property. Particular attention is paid to natural protected areas and areas of high biodiversity value. Any disturbance of natural ecosystems is minimized, rehabilitated and there is a compensatory contribution to conservation management.		 Limited
D3.2 Invasive species		
The organization takes measures to avoid the introduction of invasive species. Native species are used for landscaping and restoration wherever feasible, particularly in natural landscapes.		
D3.3 Visits to natural sites		
The organization follows appropriate guidelines for the management and promotion of visits to natural sites in order to minimize adverse impacts and maximize visitor fulfillment.		
D3.4 Wildlife interactions		
Interactions with free roaming wildlife, taking into account cumulative impacts, are non-invasive and responsibly managed to avoid adverse effects on the animals concerned and, on the viability, and behavior of populations in the wild.		
D3.5 Animal welfare		
No species of wild animal is acquired, bred or held captive, except by authorized and suitably equipped persons and for properly regulated activities in compliance with local and international law. Housing, care and handling of all wild and domestic animals meets the highest standards of animal welfare.		
D3.6 Wildlife harvesting and trade		
Wildlife species are not harvested, consumed, displayed, sold, or traded, except as part of a regulated activity that ensures that their utilization is sustainable, and in compliance with local and international laws.		

5.3 GSTC Accredited Certification

Schemes

The GSTC is the global accreditation body for sustainable tourism certification programs such as Earth Check, Eco Tourism Australia and Green Globe. These programs certify hotels/accommodation, tour operators, and destinations as having sustainable policies and practices in place. GSTC does not directly certify any products or services; but it accredits those that do so. Only some certification schemes accredited by the GSTC operate in the Pacific. These include Green Globe, EarthCheck, Rainforest Alliance and Ecotourism Australia. Being certified by an GSTC Accredited Certification Body means that the tourism product or service complies with the highest social and environmental standards on the market. Earth Check, Eco Tourism Australia and Green Globe are all GSTC accredited therefore meet all criteria.



Case Study: EarthCheck¹³

Established in 1987, EarthCheck is the world's leading scientific benchmarking certification and advisory group for travel and tourism. EarthCheck helps businesses, communities and governments to deliver clean, safe, prosperous and healthy destinations for travellers to visit, live, work and play.

What does EarthCheck certify?

Business

Level of certification

Bronze (benchmarked against standard), Silver certification (1-4 years), Gold certification (5-9 years), Platinum (11-14 years), Diamond (15 + years) based on sustained performance and annual auditing.

Standards

Earth Check is comprised of 10 Key Performance Areas: 1. Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 2. Energy Efficiency, Conservation and Management, 3. Management of Freshwater Resources, 4. Ecosystem Conservation and Management, 5. Social and Cultural Management, 6. Land Use Planning and Management, 7. Air Quality Protection, 8. Wastewater Management, 9. Solid Waste Management, 10. Environmentally Harmful Substances. There are an additional 73 sub criteria.

Benefits

Access to Earthcheck Strategy, Technology and Training services

Certification Process

Online registration, self-assessment, bronze level benchmark, 12 monthly independent audit, silver certification (1-4 years), gold certification (5-9 years), platinum (11-14 years), diamond (15 + years) based on sustained performance.

Cost

Annual fee based on level of certification. Membership Fee: AUD\$400 per member, per month

Independent Audit Fees: AUD\$2,420 1st Day, AUD\$1,650 subsequent days

Logo



¹³ <https://earthcheck.org/>

Case Study: Ecotourism Australia¹⁴

Ecotourism Australia (EA) is a not for profit organisation focused on inspiring environmentally sustainable and culturally responsible tourism. EA design and deliver certification programs for tourism products and destinations representing more than 500 environmentally responsible ecotourism operators, 1,600 products and an ever increasing number of ecotourism destinations.

What does EcoTourism Australia certify?

Business, Activities, Operators, Guides and Destinations

Level of certification

Nature based, ecotourism, advanced ecotourism (ADV), Respecting Our Culture (ROC) or Climate Action (CA) accreditation.

Standards

Ecotourism Australia is made up of 8 main criteria: Business Management and Operational Planning; Responsible Marketing; Customer Satisfaction; Environment Management; Interpretation and Education; Contribution to Conservation; Working with Local Communities; Cultural Respect and Sensitivities. This includes 35 sub criteria. There are an additional 22 criteria for specific products.

Benefits

- Ecotourism resource hub. Certificate of membership and membership logo for marketing use
- EcoBytes newsletter subscription.
- Listing on Ecotourism Australia website including logo, business description, contact details and a link to business website

Certification Process

Online application, application fee, instructions to fill out application, free coaching sessions, submit application, feedback provide, certification,

Cost

Annual fee based on turnover

Logo



¹⁴ <https://www.ecotourism.org.au/>

Case Study: Green Globe¹⁵

The Green Globe certification is a structured assessment of the sustainability performance of travel and tourism businesses and their supply chain partners.

What does Green Globe certify?

Operator, Accommodation, Destination

Level of certification

Certified Member (achieve 50% of criteria),

Gold Member (achieve 100% of criteria continuously for 5 years),

Platinum Member (achieve 100% of criteria continuously for 10 years)

Standards

Green Globe has four main criteria which are: Sustainable Management; Social/Economic; Cultural Heritage and Environmental. There are an additional 44 sub criteria and 380 performance indicators.

Benefits

- Access to the full Green Globe standard for business. Access to the Green Globe Solution Centre and to the Green Globe Academy. Green Globe websites listing. Access to Green Globe Accredited Consultants and Auditors. Green Globe Certificate.
- Cost savings from the greater efficiencies and reduced utility and resource usage
- Connection to consumers who now expect verified green credentials
- Better risk management through regular review of operations process
- Joining the leadership group within their industry
- Increase brand reputation connected to businesses' new green dimension

¹⁵ <https://greenglobe.com/#>

Certification Process

Need to become Green Globe member (annual fee) before accessing accreditation system.

Cost

Annual fee based on room numbers (for accommodation) or employee numbers

Logo



5.4 GSTC-Recognised standards

GSTC recognized standards are sustainable tourism standards that adhere to and are equivalent to the GSTC Criteria. This means that the GSTC Criteria are included within the set of standards owned by a Certification Body or a local, national, or specialized tourism organization, for example Cook Islands Tourism Corporation. GSTC-Recognised means that a sustainable tourism standard (developed by an operator, industry sector or country/nation) has been reviewed by GSTC technical experts and the GSTC Accreditation Panel and deemed equivalent to the GSTC Criteria for sustainable tourism. Having a GSTC recognised standard in place is the approach adopted by Vanuatu and other countries as outlined below.

GSTC Recognition does not ensure that the certification process is reliable, only that the set of standards used to certify includes the minimum elements to ensure sustainability. A Certifying Body that utilises a GSTC-Recognized standard may apply for GSTC-Accreditation which relates to the quality and neutrality of their certification process. The certification bodies and organisations that have had their standards recognized as aligned with the GSTC Industry Criteria — for Hotels, Tour Operators, or Destinations are listed in the GSTC website and include EarthCheck, Green Globe and Ecotourism Australia.

Over the last twelve months other destinations in the Pacific have been investigating ways to implement higher standards and demonstrate their commitment to sustainable tourism. These examples are directly relevant to the Cook Islands and outlined below.



David Kirkland

5.5 Vanuatu

The Vanuatu Department of Tourism is a government agency established under the Ministry of Tourism, Trade, Industry and Ni-Vanuatu Business. The Department focuses on policy, destination management, product development, cruise tourism and tourism standards. The Tourism Standards program (Vanuatu Tourism Permits and Accreditation Program) manages the Vanuatu Tourism Product Classification System (VTPCS) and the Vanuatu Tourism Operators Minimum Standards (VTOMS).

Ecotourism Australia was contracted, as part of the Vanuatu Strategic Tourism Action Plan (VSTAP) to provide support and assistance to the Vanuatu Department of Tourism in the development and implementation of a pilot Vanuatu Tourism Permit and Accreditation Program (VTPAP) and development of the minimum standard. All tourism operators in Vanuatu are now required to meet a set of minimum standards to be eligible for a business licence. The minimum standard was adapted for use by Niue in consultation with Vanuatu.

Vanuatu has recently recognised the value in drawing from the GSTC Criteria and GSTC's knowledge of sustainable tourism certification programs to help guide them in the further development of their program. Vanuatu has now signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with GSTC to work towards becoming a sustainable tourism destination. Activities outlined in the MOU seek to raise the standards of VTPAP to incorporate GSTC Criteria into the VTPAP as part of the continuous improvement. The VTPAP program incorporates some of the GSTC Industry Criteria, yet there is a need to incorporate more of these criteria. The process of raising the level of GSTC Criteria within the VTPAP will take place through a continuous improvement program reviewing criteria every two years.

GSTC encourages destinations pursuing sustainability practices in development and management of tourism, to join as GSTC members and apply the GSTC Destination Criteria, which eventually can lead to being certified by a GSTC-Accredited Certification Body. Vanuatu Department of Tourism has joined the GSTC as a destination member with a view that they will become the Accredited Certification Body.

Vanuatu has determined that they need a sustainable tourism certification scheme customised to its context and needs rather than purchasing an existing 'off the shelf' certification scheme. Anecdotally this customised approach appears to be a good fit for Vanuatu. This continuous improvement alongside the Vanuatu Sustainable Tourism Policy (VTSP 2018-2030) will seek to ensure Vanuatu's tourism industry is economically viable, culturally aware and environmentally responsible.



5.6 Other Countries

The following case studies outline the approaches taken by different nations and organisations that have developed their own sustainable tourism standard recognized as being aligned with the GSTC Industry Criteria — for Hotels, or Tour Operators, or both and are relevant to the Cook Islands.

Costa Rica



The Certification for Sustainable Tourism Program – CST – is a product of the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT). The CST was designed to differentiate businesses of the tourism sector, based on the degree to which they comply with a sustainable model of natural, cultural and social resource management. CST is regulated by the Costa Rican National Accreditation Commission and consists of a scale of 5 “levels” of sustainable tourism achievement. It is a GSTC recognized standard.

Mauritius



The Mauritian Standard on Sustainable Tourism (MS 165:2019) was developed to guide the sustainable development of the tourism industry in Mauritius. The focus of the Sustainability Tourism Standard is to address requirements of the environmental impacts and its effect on land, air, water and other organisms and ecosystems of the island. The social-cultural impacts that affect local communities, social structure and cultures as well as economic impacts are categorised as direct, indirect or induced. These requirements are to be measured, monitored and evaluated for continual improvement of the sustainability of the tourism industry in Mauritius. It is a GSTC recognized standard.

Eco-Certification Malta



The Eco-certification is the national scheme for ensuring the environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural sustainability of hotels and farmhouses on the Maltese Islands. The scheme was launched by the Malta Tourism Authority in 2002 and today represents over 16% of hotel accommodation covering 5-star, 4-star and 3-star categories. The criteria were last revised in June 2012 to be in line with the GSTC criteria making the shift from an environmental scheme to a sustainability scheme. Third party audits are carried out every two years to ensure that the hotels are meeting the requirements of the scheme.

Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label



The Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label is a certification programme that aims to enhance the quality and sustainability of visitors’ experiences by mitigating tourism’s negative economic, environmental and social impacts on the destination and contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural treasures for the future generations of Seychelles. It is a GSTC recognized standard.

5.7 Protected Areas

Protected area systems can initiate their own certification system in which sustainability targets are set and which each individual protected area must strive to meet. One example, the Great Barrier Marine Park Authority, is described in the case study below.

Case Study: Great Barrier Marine Park Authority

The Great Barrier Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) encourages tourism operations to adopt high standards for protection, presentation and partnership within the Marine Park. These standards enhance environmental protection, reef resilience and tourism sustainability.

GBRMPA rely on independent certification to identify high standard operations. There are two recognised independent certification schemes – administered by Ecotourism Australia, and by EarthCheck – as providing appropriate levels of environmental certification for high standard tourism in the Marine Park.

Both of these certification schemes identify and monitor high standard tourism operations. Other certification schemes may be approved in the future, based on standard assessment criteria and a simple assessment process.

Tourism businesses that are operating to a high standard in the Marine Park can apply to become certified, by contacting either EarthCheck or Ecotourism Australia and demonstrating that their operations meet the required levels of their scheme.

Interested Marine Park tourism operators are encouraged to review the available schemes and levels of certification and choose a scheme and certification level that best suits their own operations.

Ecotourism Australia and EarthCheck each provide two levels of certification acceptable

under the agency's assessment criteria for high standard tourism operations:

1. High standard tourism operations can be certified by Ecotourism Australia, at either the Ecotourism or Advanced Ecotourism levels.
2. High standard tourism operators can be certified by EarthCheck at either the EarthCheck Certified or EarthCheck Evaluate levels.



The agency has developed benefits to both reward high standard operators and provide incentives for other operators to improve their performance. The major benefit offered by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is an extended permit term of 20 years for tourism program permits.

Operators who are certified by either of the above schemes and qualify to become a recognised high standard tourism operator, can be eligible to apply for a 20-year permit for a certified tourism product. Applicants will need to complete the Marine Parks permit application form and provide evidence of their certification. The application will be assessed as per standard assessment timeframes and an assessment fee will apply.

In addition, certified operators are listed on the GBRMPA website and are showcased at various trade events (for example, the Australian Tourism Exchange).

Partnership Approaches

The marine tourism industry is a key partner in the protection and management of the Great Barrier Reef. Tourism operators help enhance visitor experiences of the Reef and play an important role in protecting the amazing biodiversity that supports their industry.

High Standard Tourism Operators voluntarily operate to a higher standard than required by legislation as part of their commitment to ecologically sustainable use. These operators are independently certified as meeting best practice standards for the key areas of protection, presentation and partnership.

The Great Barrier Reef is vulnerable to a range of environmental incidents such as oil spills, ship groundings, cyclones, flooding and coral bleaching. Two responses to environmental incidents that impact on tourism have been developed in consultation with the marine tourism industry. The first response outlines a framework for coordination and communication between organisations after an environmental incident, the second assists operators who are impacted by a severe environmental incident.

As an iconic global destination, tourism operators are taking proactive action to tackle climate change to ensure the best outlook for the Great Barrier Reef into the future.

There are also many tourism operators situated across the Marine Park who regularly work in partnership with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to monitor the Reef.

- Tourism staff who are involved in the Eye on the Reef Monitoring Program are trained to monitor and record the health of the Reef. Scientists use this information for their research activities and Marine Park managers use it to identify areas requiring concentrated effort.
- Tourism staff assist with management of the Reef by reporting any interesting and unusual things they see in the Marine Park through the Sightings Network

In the face of an outbreak of crown-of-thorns starfish, the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators and individual operators are working with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority on crown-of-thorns starfish control activities in the Marine Park. The program is funded by the Australian Government.

Master Reef Guides Program

The Great Barrier Reef tourism industry plays a vital role in presenting the values of the World Heritage Area to millions of visitors annually. Providing storytellers and ambassadors within the tourism industry with up to date information and a leadership platform will ensure world-class representation of the Reef, its values and the management in place to protect those values.

Master Reef Guides will not only provide up to date information on the Reef, but share their stories and experiences, explain how you can get involved in reef protection, and provide tips and tricks to help the Reef from anywhere in the world. The Master Reef Guide program is delivered by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators and Tourism and Events Queensland and is the first of its kind for the Reef.

Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism (QuEST)

The Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism (QuEST) provides a framework that ensures sustainable management of national parks whilst safeguarding business certainty for tourism operators.

Each year there are more than 51 million visits by Australians to Queensland's national parks and marine parks, and they are a key driver for international visitation. QuEST provides business certainty and best practice standards, with the aim to ensure the tourism industry is consistently able to provide high-quality, nature-based experiences across a range of iconic protected areas.

How do QuEST agreements work?

Step 1 Tourism operators receive information that details the timetable for implementation of QuEST in the location in which that operator conducts tours. Operators are asked to nominate their 'year of highest use' to be used in calculating capacities.

Step 2 The new allocation of capacity is advised and includes a margin for growth within sustainable limits. At each step, the tourism operator has a chance to review, request a meeting and discuss capacity and agreements.

Step 3 A transferable commercial activity agreement, for a term of 15 years, is finalised. It specifies: capacity allocations; location-specific conditions; requirements about ecotourism and conditions about existing subcontracting arrangements.

Step 4 Once all tour operators in a QuEST area have transferred to agreements, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service will assess whether there is additional commercial capacity available at those locations.

Source: www.npsr.qld.gov.au



5.8 Activity Based Guidelines

Voluntary standards, codes and guidelines may be produced for more specific tourism activities aimed at minimising their biodiversity impact. Examples include Green Fins Code for Snorkelling and Diving¹⁶. Green Fins, a public-private initiative of the United Nations Environment Programme and Reef-World, provides the only internationally recognised code of conduct used to reduce the environmental impact of the diving and snorkelling industry. Their success is entirely dependent on the sector commitment and a certification scheme that also supports the standard.

There are many examples of best practices that are being applied in the tourism sector, including use of specific technologies, operational methods and standards that result in reduced pressures on biodiversity. IUCN and the Accor Hotel Group have produced guidelines for hotels on sustainable use of biological resources, including on controlling the spread of invasive alien species¹⁷. The International Tourism Partnership has produced guidance on best practices in siting and design of tourism facilities¹⁸.



¹⁶ <https://reef-world.org/green-fins>

¹⁷ <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2012-018.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.tourismpartnership.org/resources/>



Case Study: GREEN FINS¹⁹

Founded in 2004, Green Fins is a successful example of a conservation management approach which reports measurable decreases in negative environmental effects related to the diving and snorkelling industry. Green Fins is coordinated by The Reef-World Foundation and The United Nations Environment Programme.

The Green Fins initiative aims to protect and conserve coral reefs through environmentally friendly guidelines that promote a sustainable diving and snorkelling industry.

Green Fins facilitates environmental standards for the industry through a Code of Conduct. The approach has been adopted by 11 countries and nearly 600 individual marine tourism companies.

The Green Fins approach encompasses three main aspects:

- The only internationally recognised environmental standards for the diving and snorkelling industry, based on a 15-point code of conduct. This is supported by a robust assessment system to measure compliance
- Supporting the development or strengthening of relevant regulatory frameworks
- Strategic outreach to, and capacity building among, diving and snorkelling centres as well as governmental agencies.

Green Fins supports members of the diving and snorkelling industry to take action to lessen the pressures on coral reefs by providing dive and snorkel companies practical, low-cost alternatives to damaging

practices as well as providing strategic support and resources.

The Green Fins network is made up of a global community of environmentally conscious dive and snorkel operators, governments and NGOs. Membership is free, although applicants must cover the cost of up to two assessors for at least 1 diving or snorkelling excursion per year. Membership includes annual assessments, training and feedback.

Green Fins Mission Statement

“To protect and conserve coral reefs by establishing and implementing environmentally friendly guidelines to promote a sustainable diving and snorkelling tourism industry.”

Currently, the Green Fins network is made up of:

- 11 Countries
- 19 National and local government agency or NGO implementing partners engaged
- 43 Active government/NGO staff trained as Assessors or Coordinators to run the network at a national level
- 56 Diving hotspots across South East Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and the Caribbean
- 500+ Dive centres members since 20

¹⁹ <https://www.greenfins.net/>

Figure 11. Green Fins Environmental Briefing Guidelines




Environmental Briefing Guidelines

Boat and dive briefings are a great opportunity to tell your guests about Green Fins and how you and your company expect people to behave while diving with you. Research shows that environmental briefings work incredibly well to reduce diver damage. By providing clear and interesting direction, you and your guests can become Green Fins champions! The checklist below outlines environmental content to be included in your standard dive and boat briefings on every tour. Please use the Green Fins icons and Guidelines to the Code of Conduct for further support.

Boat Briefing	Dive Briefing
<p>✓ Marine toilet</p> <p> Anything you flush down the toilet will enter the ocean. Ask your guests to use the trash can for tissue and to avoid using it over dive sites.</p> <p>✓ No littering</p> <p> Marine litter can kill turtles, birds and coral. Show guests how to safely dispose of waste while on board, including food waste, so they do not become part of the problem.</p> <p>✓ Use ashtrays</p> <p> Cigarette butts are the most commonly found marine litter item and can poison marine life. Provide your guests with ashtrays for proper disposal, and point them out during your briefing.</p> <p>✓ No fish feeding</p> <p> Any food thrown overboard attracts fish away from their natural food source. This damages the food chain and leads to unattractive, algae-covered coral reefs. By not fish feeding you and your guests protect the reef.</p>	<p>✓ No touching</p> <p> Touching the reef can damage it and spread disease. Harassing and touching marine life can remove them from their homes leaving them vulnerable to predation. Sticks and reef hooks should only be used on rock, NOT coral. Teach your guests the difference and encourage good buoyancy.</p> <p>✓ Keep away from the reef</p> <p> Encouraging guests to maintain good buoyancy reduces the damage caused by fins and fin wash. By not getting too close to the reef, animals feel safer, allowing you to enjoy more natural behaviour.</p> <p>✓ No gloves</p> <p> In some dive sites it's illegal to use gloves while diving. By providing protection, they encourage people to touch the reef and marine life. In most cases, they won't remove the risk of injury from dangerous marine life.</p> <p>✓ Secure all equipment</p> <p> Dangling equipment may break coral without divers even realising. Protect the coral and your equipment by using BCD clips to secure gauges and octopus.</p> <p>✓ No collecting</p> <p> If it is found underwater, it should stay underwater. Collecting marine life, dead or alive, should be discouraged because it is often illegal and can leave your favourite species homeless.</p> <p>✓ Be a responsible photographer</p> <p> Research shows that photographers damage the reef more than any other diver. Help them to maintain neutral buoyancy throughout the dive and correct them if necessary. Encourage minimal flash photography as 'over-flashing' can damage many species.</p>
<p>Lead by example and don't be afraid to help your guests be better divers.</p>	

www.greenfins.net




Get up close with nature. Discover more of the lush fauna in Rarotonga, David Kirkland

6 Key Findings and Recommendations

Certification is considered an important mechanism to assist the tourism industry achieve sustainable tourism outcomes and to protect the biodiversity of the Cook Island’s and its protected areas. The Mana Tiaki Eco Certification system has made significant contribution to these outcomes, but there are a number of significant improvements that can be made to strengthen the existing system.

6.1 Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

The SWOT analysis presented below provides an assessment of the effectiveness of the the current approach in driving sustainable tourism and biodiversity outcomes, how the system could be improved, and what issues are likely to emerge.

Table 14. SWOT Analysis of the Mani Tiaki Eco Certification System

Strengths (are to be built upon)	Weaknesses (are to be overcome)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system is operating with voluntary take up by industry - 40 operators within the first year of operation • MTEC has changed the business practices of tourism businesses • Distribution of membership between small/medium and larger operators • Supported by CIT and CITIC • Separation of function with TIS as administrator • Links to TIS biodiversity programs and support for the NGO • Developed in partnership with government tourism industry consultants, and conservation group representatives • Program description and application conveniently available on TIS website and MTEC website https://www.manatiaki.org/ • Support for tourism industry about green practices • Easy for businesses to apply and become certified (self-evaluation) • Accepts application from all tourism businesses registered with CITIC and therefore accredited with Quality Assured program • Sliding scale of fees, yearly basis • Compliance is monitored annually with independent auditors • Minimum points must be achieved across all criteria • Extra bonus points may be earned for practices not already listed on the application • Businesses receive logo, technical assistance and training, media exposure, coverage on TIS and CIT websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of tangible benefits for businesses • Blanket standard for all types of activities • Lacks different levels of certification • Criteria does not differentiate the life cycle of businesses (start up, maturity and decline) • Self-evaluation used to certify businesses • Transparency of system is questioned by businesses • Lack of criteria that relates specifically to tour operators and activity providers; many do not see the system being relevant to their operations with result being low levels of certification by this market sector • No baseline data is required to apply for certification • Business can be certified by obtaining only about 54% of available points • Missing six of the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria • Lack of adaptive management framework - businesses not required to show improvement over time • No motivation for continual improvement of the certified business • The cost of external auditors is high • Rely on ‘committed and willing’ businesses as others find it too difficult • Focus of indicators is on quantity not quality • Some businesses find the criteria too easy

Strengths (are to be built upon)	Weaknesses (are to be overcome)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National strategic plan recognises sustainable tourism development Environmental sustainability written into tourism policy and framework and recognises the need for industry certification Provides practical advice to operators Locally developed to be locally relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dominated by larger sectors and businesses in the industry No guidelines for activities likely to impact on protected areas i.e. snorkelling, diving, etc.
Opportunities (are to be taken advantage of)	Threats (need to be minimised)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential to strengthen the strategic framework over time Strengthen criteria across all areas and to all CITIC members Develop a tiered system – greater effort = greater benefit, higher operator standards and performance = greater benefits New programme with potential to gain wide recognition and grow May lead to an increased awareness among consumers and private sector about triple bottom line sustainable tourism standards Opportunity to educate tourism industry about green practices Pacific wide standard is being considered and potential for ‘standardised’ approach with global support for operators Strengthen motivators Low level of awareness of the interdependencies between biodiversity and protected areas, and the Cook Islands tourism sector Potential for businesses to learn from each other and create best practice cluster for others to follow Potential access/capacity rights for eco certified operators within Marae Moana marine protected area (subject to future protected area management policy) Promote to be part of the journey – certification is not the end point Develop partnerships at national level eg https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sustainable-tourism/global-tourism-plastics-initiative and local business level and support business to engage with them directly to support biodiversity eg https://www.coralgardeners.org/coral-reefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unknown consumer demand and therefore extrinsic benefits may not be realised for operators Status quo remains with motivated operator bearing environmental responsibility The number of MTEC operators declines as a result of financial pressure due to COVID 19 TIS underfunded and cannot sustain administration of the MTEC system Duplicate systems operating Biodiversity threats from tourism activities remain or increase with increased visitation

6.2 KEY FINDINGS

There are advantages and disadvantages of using certification as a mechanism for biodiversity conservation

The main advantage of MTEC is that it provides a mechanism for operators to actively engage in sustainable tourism activities, and clearly distinguishing them from their counterparts. It is one of the few objective ways of enabling those who want to promote sustainability in their actions and choices (e.g. individual consumers, tour operators and governments) to know who to support.

For Cook Islands Tourism and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council the main advantages of MTEC certification are that it can:

- Raise the market profile and image of a destination in terms of its quality and environmental standards.
- Provide a way of encouraging the industry to raise standards in specifically identified areas.
- Potentially lower regulatory costs.

The main disadvantage of MTEC is that it can be costly and time consuming to administer. It is difficult to persuade businesses to participate, as they often do not see clear advantages that they can set against the costs of participating in the process (e.g. meeting the inspection fee, and, potentially, complying with the requirements). Certification can therefore be perceived as creating a barrier, especially to very small businesses which is the predominant characteristic of tourism businesses in the Cook Islands.

MTEC generates biodiversity benefits through improved business practices

MTEC certified operators found the positive benefits of certification to be improved business practices and reduced operating costs due to resource savings and efficiencies. They found the certification process to be educational as it increased their knowledge and awareness about sustainability in business and equipped them with policies and processes to improve performance. Certification also provided

operators with validation of their performance and provided them with a 'good corporate conscience'.

MTEC expands knowledge of good practice amongst a broad range of businesses

The certification process facilitates learning and sharing of knowledge about sustainability between all stakeholders. It helps the business to improve business practices through learning about sustainability. Certification not only helps business operators to identify where and how they can introduce sustainability measures across their business, it also helps to communicate these initiatives to industry stakeholders, including staff, other businesses, locals, and visitors.

The associated knowledge flow begins when an operator is motivated by their internal values and prompted by other support or incentive drivers to act and seek information about certification. As they learn about certification and sustainable tourism practices, they begin to think about what changes they could implement in their business to improve sustainable performance.

Those businesses that go through the certification process learn by putting into practice a range of improved and more efficient processes and procedures. Business operators learn how to improve their business performance by examining their practices to identify where they can reduce costs, improve efficiencies, minimise negative impacts and streamline operations. The key is to develop a system that recognises continual improvement and provides incentives for certified operators to continue their journey toward sustainability.

The learning benefit

This positive effect of the learning process of certification is clearly one of the greatest outcomes. Learning about certification is teaching businesses about better or exemplary practices, even if they eventually do not seek certification.

There is potential to capitalise upon this learning outcome to stimulate increased action towards certification. Fostering knowledge

generation and shared learning through existing networks and industry clusters can enhance sustainable business practices. These exchanges can be facilitated by TIS, CITIC and CIT.

Knowledge and awareness about how to apply for MTEC certification is low among tourism businesses. Raising awareness across all businesses and providing a step-by-step process on how to incorporate triple bottom line principles (like the GSTC) into tourism business practices will support sustainable tourism outcomes and is a necessary step in ensuring a successful future for MTEC and biodiversity in the Cook Islands.

Strengthen the criteria and tailor the system

MTEC's minimum criteria requirements for certification are lenient and are most relevant to accommodation operators. Only a portion of the criteria listed on the application are required to be fulfilled for a business to be certified. In setting minimum criteria requirements of MTEC it must keep in mind that if they set them too high, or they are too complicated, businesses won't be able to enter the scheme. Conversely, if they are set too low, the risk of not achieving wider national environmental targets prevail. A tiered system of certification will recognise various levels of performance and provide an improvement framework that will benefit biodiversity priorities.

There is also pressing need for the system to be tailored to the different types of tourism businesses. Currently, the criteria is more suited to accommodation and far less relevant and suitable for activity-based operators. It's also heavily skewed around waste and water criteria and lacks coverage of businesses operating in protected areas.

Strengthen the benefits

The contradiction between expected benefits of certification and delivered benefits, highlights an opportunity for change. The desired benefits that are currently seen as not being delivered relate to image enhancement factors such as marketing benefit, improved business reputation, increased competitive advantage and the promotion of sustainable business

practices. These factors are stated as motivational drivers for operators to pursue certification, however the benefits are not being delivered as tangible outcomes of certification to businesses.

Currently, most tourism operators do not view certification as delivering enough of a value in exchange for the time, effort and resources required to achieve certification. The exchange value is seen as being higher than the use value. They consider that the resource costs to obtain and maintain certification outweigh the benefits they would gain.

Tourism operators view these potential benefits as important elements that would create increased value for the certification of their business. Operators may require a combination of supporting, incentivised and compliance motivators to provide enough impetus to seek and achieve certification. The lower the foundational motivation of the operator, the more supported and incentivised motivation they are likely to require. There is also an opportunity to expand the incentivised motivators that may improve the tangible benefits of certification. Some incentivised motivators such as reduced operating costs and improved business practices and performance are already being delivered. Other incentivised motivators can potentially act to provide a tangible value to the achievement of certification. These are mostly business incentives, such as reduced operating costs, reduced rates or membership fees and can also potentially include preferential consideration to certified operators to conduct business in key biodiversity areas.

Incentivised motivators are successfully offered in places such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Although businesses can operate in the Great Barrier Reef without certification (there is no formal restrictive rule), the implied rule is that certification is advantageous, supported and recognised. This has led to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park having the highest level of certified operators in Australia and 80% of all visitors to the park going on tours with certified operators.

Strengthen the operating environment

One of the issues that emerged from the survey was the dilemma faced by the operator created by their internal beliefs and morals, and the rules and norms of industry. Many operators are ethically motivated towards the object of certification through their socially shared belief is that is ‘something they should do’. However, as individuals they are demotivated because it is not a regulatory requirement and currently not expected by the community. The perceived benefits of eco certification are not compelling enough to increase the number of eco certified businesses. These factors combine to create the implied rule that eco certification is of little value to operators. Therefore, creating a “little more carrot and a little more stick” is likely to result in greater uptake of eco certification.

Always maintain an independent assessment process

Third-party certification (where an assessment of the business being certified is done independently of both the applicant and the awarding body) is a key aspect of any credible certification program, however it is costly in terms of administration. With a low number of operators to support the cost of contracting independent auditors (from New Zealand), the risk is that in order to maintain the important second/third-party audits TIS will need to cut other parts of the program like technical support or educational programs when funding is low. The risk of losing credibility by allowing self-assessment is not worth the savings from less frequent, or non-existent audits. Self-check ‘audits’ will be nothing more than statements of self-commitment and suitable only for awareness-raising purposes rather than quality assurance. Regular, independent third-party audits will be a necessary requirement for MTEC accreditation programme going forward.



6.3 Recommendations

Strengthen certification criteria for Quality Assurance and MTEC Programmes

- Integrate MTEC into the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Framework (without compromising standards).
- Increase the **minimum environmental standards** for Cook Islands Quality Assurance Framework for all operators
- Use the GSTC criteria to strengthen the biodiversity and ecosystem service components of the certification system and align the standards to focus on **priority areas for biodiversity and environmental sustainability** for the Cook Islands
- Create a tiered system of certification creating a pathway for all businesses within the Cook Islands Quality Assurance Programme to achieve Basic Eco Certification (Silver) and Advanced Eco Certification (Gold) based on a points system (minimum level)
- To address the perceived barriers to eco certification it is recommended that consideration be given to the range of **financial and non-financial incentives** that can be provided to encourage businesses to become and stay certified, for example discounted or preferential access to marketing, training and awards initiatives. The scheme will need to produce consistent quality outcomes and provide for differentiation from nonaccredited products and services.
- Refine **measurement and monitoring** mechanisms to facilitate a clearer understanding of the effects of eco certification on business performance and the impact of eco certification on addressing the environmental issues in the Cook Islands for both program managers and certified businesses. This is critical for measuring the effectiveness of the program.
- Support for biodiversity and conservation should be facilitated through workshops, training, communication, commitment, and ownership of programs, for example setting up local or regional networks of accredited businesses. This should be offered to eco certified and non-certified businesses.
- Use the certification programme to promote investment in infrastructure that protects and supports sustainable tourism- including effective management and expansion of protected areas, and restoration of ecosystem services, for example, by rehabilitating reefs, wetlands and forested areas.
- The minimum standard should have an explicit goal of making a significant contribution towards halting the loss of biological diversity, and in creating the conditions to help achieve an increase in biodiversity.
- Experience provides several pointers to good practice in certification (as shown in the Case Studies) which should be kept in mind when developing new schemes or strengthening the existing ones. They include:
 - Link certification to capacity building, mainly by strengthening the advice and personal help given to applicants and at the time of inspection, and by delivering associated training programmes.
 - Include government services in the certification process to strengthen official ties and encourage enterprises by demonstration.
 - Ensure that the requirements and processes are as simple and clear as possible, enabling ease of audit and rapid compliance.

- Pursue more specific ways of giving teeth to the scheme and linking it to other policy areas.

Increase Engagement, Awareness Raising and Capacity-Building

Guidance on best practices for avoiding or minimising the impacts of tourism activities on biodiversity needs to be promoted widely to, and implemented by, the tourism sector.

Essentially the tourism sector in the Cook Islands is made up of private businesses which supply services to visitors. They play a critical role in presenting the Cook Islands to international visitors and creating enjoyable, memorable experiences. Their developments, operations and the decisions that they make will also have a significant influence on biodiversity. They are the drivers of change. They also provide the main ways of reaching markets and influencing consumers. They have a strong impact on local communities, which can be both positive and negative, through the provision of employment, involvement with local supply chains, use of local resources, and investment and engagement in local infrastructure and support services. Others may be less proactive but still take account of biodiversity in the management of their businesses or in the suppliers that they use.

An important part of the capacity building process involves helping individual businesses to make their operations more sustainable. Techniques can also include the following:

- Providing direct advice on environmental management and other sustainability issues have proved to be one of the best ways of achieving effective change. Advice can also be integrated with the certification process as indicated earlier. A challenge is often to get enterprises to seek advice on sustainability in the first place. For this reason, a wider audience may be reached by integrating sustainability with more mainstream business and marketing advice.
- Running training courses and workshops: these may cover relevant

aspects of business and environmental management. Training sessions, including familiarization excursions, can also be used effectively to raise enterprise awareness of the special qualities and sensitivities of the local natural and cultural heritage, which may be passed on to guests.

- Using advisory manuals: a number of countries and projects have produced written manuals for enterprises on sustainability, which also include contacts for more detailed information. These are a good way to reach a relatively wide audience but may be more effective if combined with direct training and other instruments.
- Improving the awareness and skills of individual staff, especially in larger establishments, should also be part of the capacity building process. This is relevant to many aspects of the sustainability agenda, including quality of jobs and overall levels of performance.
- The need to make sure that training is designed to be accessible to all, irrespective of educational level.

Developing networks and learning areas

One of the best ways of securing more participation in capacity building processes, and of increasing the chances of implementation of good practice over time, is to encourage and help businesses to work together in clusters or networks. Networks can in themselves strengthen the ability of enterprises to address sustainability issues. Networks may be geographically or thematically based and may be related to established structures such as tourist associations. They provide the advantage of fostering common standards, mutual support and peer pressure between members.

A further development of the network approach is the concept of a 'learning area'. Traditionally, tourism training has been a one-way process with individuals or enterprises receiving instruction from training bodies. New

approaches point to more dynamic, evolving, two-way processes, based on the concept of continuous learning.

A 'tourism learning area' links stakeholders in a destination (or thematic area) so that they can work together to improve their individual performance and the quality and sustainability of tourism in the area, through the development and exchange of skills, knowledge and experience. All relevant public bodies and private enterprises would be part of the learning area, including both recipients and deliverers of training. The learning area approach seeks to ensure that capacity building processes are developed with the enterprises themselves and properly tailored to their needs, while also building cooperation and reducing duplication between training providers. A web portal would play a key role in defining the learning area and facilitating communication within it.

Multi-stakeholder structures and participatory processes

While the individual position and contribution of the above stakeholders should be recognized, collaborative planning and action is needed. As well as ensuring an equitable and inclusive approach and agreement on aims and actions, a collaborative approach can strengthen the spread of awareness, sharing of knowledge, access to skills and resources, and outreach of influence. This requires government agencies, NGOs, protected area managers and the tourism industry to engage in the planning and operations relating to tourism activities that impact on natural and cultural values.

Measure what matters for biodiversity

To ensure the key performance indicators are aligned to national biodiversity, it is recommended that baseline and management information relating to the potential impact of tourism on biodiversity in the Cook Islands is undertaken in three areas as shown in Table 15. Much of this information is already collected, however each area needs to be considered alongside each other to develop the complete

picture and develop goals, indicators and targets for biodiversity and tourism²⁰. In collecting and assembling this information, attention should be paid to:

- Spatial distribution of biodiversity, tourism, and other issues, which will require map-based data of the Cook Islands
- Any known direct impacts of tourism on biodiversity
- Past and current cumulative impacts
- Ability to replicate data over time to monitor and measure change.

There is also a need to undertake more extensive monitoring and evaluation of outcomes of projects that include tourism components so as to better understand the effectiveness of these components in relation to tourism and overall project objectives, those factors that contribute to their success, and any problems that have been experienced and how these have been overcome.



²⁰ The development and use of biodiversity indicators in business: an overview, IUCN 2018

Table 15. Information requirements - managing for tourism and biodiversity

Topic	Useful data
Biodiversity in the Cook Islands	Details of any protected areas and areas of significant biodiversity
	Specifications of ecosystems, habitats and species, including key features and their protection status.
	Trends in extent and quality of key habitats, wildlife populations targeted by tourism and other indicator species, including causes of identified change
	Current and potential future threats to biodiversity, identifying areas with sensitivity and vulnerability and any challenges relating to local communities
	Level of local community and business awareness of biodiversity value and impact on conservation
Tourism supply and demand, performance and outlook	Number, origin and length of stay of visitors (preferably by month/quarter)
	Visitor flows – routes used, main areas/sites visited, activities undertaken
	Trends in visitation
	Visitor opinion of the area – assets, needs, level of satisfaction
	Visitor spend overall, entrance/user fees, and other biodiversity-related services
	Supply of accommodation and other visitor products and services, including their level of environmental accreditation
	Recent and proposed tourism related developments
	Tourism product occupancy or other performance data
	Perceptions of current and future markets and outlook
	Other relevant sociocultural and economic data
Level of local community engagement with tourism, directly and indirectly (e.g. equity, employment, sales of products and services)	
Other sources of local income/livelihood and effect on biodiversity	
Type, significance, location and sensitivity of cultural assets	
Pattern of land ownership, including traditional and community land rights	
Administrative and management data	
Past and current area plans, including tourism, environment, development and land use plans	
Recent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), Strategic Environmental Assessments and their outcome	
Application and enforcement of relevant legislation and regulations	
Available human and financial resources for conservation and management	

Provide clear Indicators to support biodiversity conservation

Indicators are used to provide information to monitor, track, and report on performance and progress toward targets. Whilst there are indicators to support the targets in the R2R project, the indicators have limitations. As a result, it is not clear that progress measured by the indicators reflect the overarching outcome of mainstreaming conservation and biodiversity activities into tourism. For example, the indicators for the targets did not specify what type of change is required to achieve the target and the quality expected. Target 21 focused solely on the number of businesses to be certified, not the quality of the certification criteria or areas of priority.

Changes in key indicators both help identify the need for action by tourism businesses and help define the key elements to be monitored through certification programs, the elements for which standards are needed, and the criteria for certification. When certification is in place, the same indicators can be used as performance measures to clarify the impact of certification and to permit changes to improve certification programs.

Encourage voluntary contributions

There is increasing evidence that tourists and the tourism industry are prepared to provide voluntary support for environmental conservation and the wellbeing of local communities in destinations. Several studies have identified that tourists are willing to pay for such outcomes, provided that local benefits can be clearly identified.

Many tourism enterprises are taking direct supportive action, or are prepared to do so, as part of their corporate social responsibility. Voluntary contributions and actions can centre around providing monetary support or may involve the provision of assistance in kind. Voluntary contributions have the advantage of being based on goodwill, commitment and active participation, although they are unlikely to raise as much revenue as compulsory charges.

Recognising that MTEC certified operators already undertake this activity, this could also be extended to the broader tourism industry. Examples include:

- Tourists being invited to make cash donations to local projects which can vary from small sums to substantial amounts.
- A small charge made by tour operators or service providers as a routine addition to a bill, from which tourists can opt out of if they do not wish to pay. This has the advantage of simplicity and usually leads to very few refusals.
- Tourists providing help in kind. An example of this is provided by the growing number of holiday and educational travel offers involving participation in conservation or community schemes.
- Contributions by tourists to carbon bio-sequestration schemes (e.g. tree planting), as a way of offsetting the effect of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from their travel.



6.4 Conclusion

The Ridge to Reef Project and its partners are to be commended for their work in establishing a framework for managing the biodiversity impacts of tourism on the nation's protected areas. There is more work to be done and the Te Kaveinga Nui, National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 – 2020 and the Sustainable Tourism Development Framework provide the strategic framework for advancing sustainable tourism in the Cook Islands.

The recommendations in this report together with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's criteria for sustainable tourism destinations provide useful insights to strengthen the tourism industry's response to biodiversity conservation and other areas of sustainable tourism.

With intention and focus on the contents of this report, the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council can mainstream biodiversity conservation into the operations and practices of the tourism industry and continue the journey towards sustainable tourism as intended by the Ridge to Reef Project.







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