

A EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR A SUSTAINABLE VISITOR ECONOMY: MAKING EUROPE A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE AND VISIT THROUGH INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION

How NECSTouR's work supports the transition of EU destinations to sustainability through digitalization: The drivers of the Digital Age and Green Deal

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INTRODUCTION

The European Commission Von der Leyen has set the Green Deal as the EU strategy for sustainable growth setting ambitious targets to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. The Digital Age is success factor in its achievement as well as a global behavioural change of businesses, consumers and policy makers.

Tourism is a place-based and big resource consuming industry while transport-related CO₂ emissions of the tourism sector are 22% of the whole emissions from transport. Therefore, Europe must become the first climate neutral destination while becoming the first climate neutral continent.

NECSTouR, the network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism, positions regional sustainable tourism as a key driver of both the EU Green Deal and Digital Age - the second at the service of the first - from a destination governance perspective.

NECSTouR refers to tourism as the "Visitor Economy" because the visitor journey involves the support of a whole diversity of suppliers, across many different sectors, and of which 90% are SMEs.

The Visitor Economy is a fundamental driver for the success of the EU Green Deal and this can only happen in partnership with all the Visitor Economy stakeholders since the beginning of the process.

This policy paper outlines how NECSTouR supports this objective and where we identify the EU making the biggest impact, with concrete measures to accompany the dual transition of destinations to sustainability through digitalisation to make Europe a better place to live and visit through pan-European cooperation.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE “VISITOR ECONOMY” AS THE CROSS-CUTTING DRIVER OF THE GREEN DEAL AND DIGITAL AGE

The Visitor Economy touches almost every part of our society and can be an incredible force for good, supporting many of the wider principles of the EU, and bringing with it prosperity for cities and regions, while encouraging cultural exchange and understanding. Its role as a driver of economic wellbeing and employment across almost every sector is fundamental to the competitiveness of the EU.

According to the OECD, the number of international arrivals is estimated to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, with 833 Million visitors predicted to arrive in Europe. An entire visitor economy involving almost every other sector – transport, food and drink, retail, leisure, etc – and a wide range of stakeholders that can contribute to every single one of the Green Deal’s key measures: The circular economy, the Farm to Fork strategy, biodiversity strategy, among other.

NECSTouR works with destinations as public-private ecosystems which must be managed in a sustainable way for the wellbeing of both residents, visitors and businesses, where applied technology aims at mitigating the environmental impact of achieving the global 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The EU has the competence to provide the necessary framework conditions for these destinations to cooperate and benchmark by coordinating and guiding these efforts at supranational level as a fundamental driver to the success of the Green Deal.

WHERE EU EFFORTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE: A EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR A SUSTAINABLE VISITOR ECONOMY

Mainstreaming EU policies, financial instruments, good practices and projects on how to accelerate the digitalisation of European destinations as part of their transition to sustainability, in light with the Green Deal targets, is the way forward. This includes roles and responsibilities for all the governance level and in partnership with the private sector.

Therefore, a European agenda for a Sustainable Visitor Economy, a long-term vision, with clear objectives, principles inspired by the Barcelona Declaration Better Places to Live, Better Places to Visit¹, dedicated resources and performance indicators, while generating the behavioural change which is needed for European destinations to flourish and making Europe a Better Place to Live and Visit, is fully proportional and more effective.

¹ The Barcelona Declaration « [Better Places to Live, Better Places to Visit](#)” is based on the five key principles Smart and inclusive governance, Adding value to the sense of place, Using a holistic vision for marketing and preservation; Balancing place, people and business, Connecting people to people.

This strategy should lead destinations and their ecosystems to achieve smart and sustainable growth, address climate change and improve resource efficiency, embrace digitalisation, boost skills, deliver market intelligence and optimise the potential that tourism has as one of the drivers of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.

Sustainable tourism – despite its massive, wide reaching impact and vast potential to contribute to the success of the Green Deal – is not currently targeted by any European programme. By co-ordinating measures at EU level to support the transition towards sustainable growth and digital maturity, a sustainable tourism budget line could hugely support the scale of carbon reduction in the EU. The solution goes partly by securing the “Sustainable Tourism” budget line proposed by the European Parliament.

Likewise, the Visitor Economy SMEs require direct and visible measures to benefit from EU programmes targeting innovation, digitalisation, skills and overall business competitiveness at European level: Digital Europe, Invest EU, Creative Europe, Erasmus, in addition to the opportunities that the ESIF will also bring in their respective countries.

A European Statistical Governance to monitor the performance of the destinations transition should be established to recognise the socio-economic importance of the Visitor Economy, measure sustainable tourism at sub-national level for regions to benchmark official data, enable evidence-based policy decisions for effective destination management with accurate intelligence, combining official statistics and big data.

The focus of within the above European specific framework driving both the Green Deal and Digital Age targets at pan-European destination level should be:

- The visitor economy should be recognised as a core part of the thematic meetings and high level groups coordinated by DG CLIMA, in view of Climate Law, the effective mainstreaming of sustainability across all areas needed to make the Green Deal a success, and ensuring a competitive and sustainable Europe.
- Likewise, the visitor economy should be an integral part of the impact assessment being conducted on EU greenhouse gas emissions and how these can be reduced. Travel and tourism mobility, for example, will be key components of this.
- The accommodation sector needs to be considered specifically within the European Commission’s forthcoming initiative “Renovation Wave” for the building sector.

- Dedicated and specific support for the digitalisation of SMEs in the relevant sectors of the visitor economy should be deployed to facilitate the tourism SMEs capability to embrace opportunities in the digital economy to boost their competitiveness: Access to new markets, business intelligence, product development targeting customer preferences, proficient management and building resilience.

WHERE NECSTouR SUPPORT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

NECSTouR is the voice of European regions committed to sustainability – economic, social and environmental - as a crucial driver of destination competitiveness. NECSTouR provides an integrated approach to tourism governance linking regional and European levels of government.

NECSTouR embraces the objectives of the EU Green Deal and Digital Age through an interregional cooperation strategy - the NECSTouR five “S” of the sustainable tourism of tomorrow² – Smart destinations, Sociocultural balance, Skills and talent, Safety and security and Statistics and measurability.

For this, the NECSTouR programme “Driving behavioural change for European sustainable destinations through trans-regional cooperation” specifically supports NECSTouR regions as they lead their destinations towards sustainability, innovation and inclusivity across the visitor economy value chain: Insights, case studies and experience in activity that is already delivering this meaningful change - from mobilising industry and accelerating the shift to sustainable mobility, from influencing policy and preserving our natural environments, to supporting more sustainable and environmentally healthy food systems, while offering visitors a sustainable tourism experience.

NECSTouR looks forward to further engaging with dialogue with all stakeholders concerned to drive behavioural change for the sustainable tourism governance and elaborating the European agenda for a Sustainable Visitor Economy: Towards the transition of destinations to make Europe a Better Place to Live and Visit.

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² [NECSTouR Roadmap 2019-2021 The five “S” of the sustainable tourism of tomorrow](#)