

# **Sustainability Policy for ABTO (Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators) Members**



As travel companies who engage with various stakeholders in tourism, namely consumers, tour guides, travel agencies, hotels, transport companies, restaurants, and attractions, we as Tour Operators and Travel Agencies companies members of ABTO in Bhutan understand our key role and influence in the sustainable development of tourism. Therefore, we are committed to promoting sustainability. We aim to follow, implement and promote good sustainability practices to maximize positive impacts and minimize negative impacts on tourism from our operations and to influence our clients and partners to do the same.

Our sustainability policy is divided into 9 themes. Each theme consists of a set of principles and practical actions accordingly:

## **1. Sustainability Management & Legal compliance**

We commit to sustainable management by practicing the following actions:

- To have a designated employee who is responsible for sustainability coordinator tasks;
- To have a sustainability mission statement that is published on our website and communicated to customers, partners and suppliers;
- To have a written sustainability policy that aims for a reduction of the negative social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of the company's activities; and includes employee related health and safety aspects that are publicly accessible;
- To have sustainability action plan with clear targets, actions, measures, responsibilities and time planning;
- To publish our sustainability report at least every two years;
- To ensure that our customers, partners and suppliers, are respecting and safeguarding the rights of children by;
  - Forbidding and engaging stakeholders in the prevention of sexual exploitation of children;
  - Having a clause in contracts throughout the value chain stating a common repudiation and zero tolerance policy of sexual exploitation of children;

We commit to complying with all national legislation, regulations and codes of practice.

## **2. Internal management: social policy & human rights**

We commit to sustainable internal management by having clear written and well-communicated social policy that includes the following principles:

To grant employees the freedom of employment and contract termination with notice (ideally minimum one month) and without penalty

To include labor conditions according to the Bhutan Regulations on working conditions, 2012 and the Labour and Employment Act, 2007

Wage rate is to be mentioned in the contract and equals or above the national legal wage;

- To determinate and compensate of overtime working hours based on agreement;
- To provide medical and liability insurance according to the Bhutanese law;
- To grant employees fixed paid yearly holiday and sick leave and unpaid annual leave allowance;

- To have health and safety policy for employees which complies to national legal standards;
- To have first aid kits and trained staff are available at all relevant locations;
- To obey national law concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment;
- To have effective documented procedures in place for employees to voice out their complaints and expectations;
- To provide periodic guidance and training for employees on roles, rights and responsibilities regarding health and safety issues. This includes fire and relevant natural disasters.

We commit to practice human rights by ensuring the enforcement of following practices:

- To declare not to hinder trade union membership, collective labor negotiations and representation of members by trade unions;
- To participate and comply with a (sector wide) collective labor condition negotiation structure (if locally existing);
- To prohibit discriminations, regard to recruitment, conditions of employment, access to training and senior positions, or promotion in terms of gender, race, age, disability, ethnicity, religion/beliefs or sexual orientation;

### **3. Internal Management: Environment and community relations**

We commit to practice environmental protection and enhance community relations by ensuring the enforcement of following practices:

#### **Procurement**

- Actively reduce the use of disposable and consumer goods;
- Favor the purchase of sustainable goods and services, whenever these are available and of sufficient quality;
- Utilize office paper use (internal and administrative use) with sustainability credentials (recycled, FSC or sustainably produced), when such options are locally available;
- Set copy and printing machines and all equipment by default to double-sided printing or other forms of paper saving modes;

#### **Energy**

- Have an active commitment to measure, monitor and reduce energy consumption;
- Purchase green energy and efficient lighting for all areas, when available;
- Switch off Lights and equipment when not in use;
- Prefer low energy equipment when buying new items, including considerations of cost and quality;
- Set all equipment by default to the energy-saving mode;

#### **Water**

- Have an active policy to reduce water consumption, implemented and monitored on a monthly or yearly basis for benchmark purposes;
- Use sustainable water sourcing, which does not adversely affect environmental flows;
- Measure the office water use on a monthly or yearly basis for benchmark purposes, and water meters are regularly read to track potential leaks;

## **Waste Management**

- Comply with the national legislation concerning waste disposal;
- Develop and implement a solid waste reduction and recycling policy, with quantitative goals;
- Take action to reduce the amount of (non-refillable) plastic bottles of drinking water for office use;
- Separate all materials which can be recycled and organize collection and proper disposal;
- Recycle or properly dispose of batteries;

## **Reducing Pollution**

- Comply with national legislation of wastewater treatment, which should be reused or released safely;
- Minimize and substitute the use of harmful substances and manage properly the storage, handling and disposal of chemicals;

## **Mobility**

- Maintain and properly check motorized company vehicles, to reduce emissions and energy use and make sure they comply with the legal emission standards;

## **Sustainability training and awareness raising**

- Provide periodic guidance, training and/or information to all staff members, about their roles and responsibilities with respect to internal environmental practices;

## **Land use and community relations**

- Comply with land use, zoning and protected or heritage area laws and regulations; when planning, designing, constructing, renovating, operating or demolishing company buildings and infrastructure;
- Take into account the capacity and integrity of protected and sensitive natural and cultural heritage when planning and designing newly constructed company buildings;
- Adopt locally appropriate and sustainable practices and materials in planning, design, construction of new buildings or renovations;

## **4. Transport**

We try to ensure that vehicles used on tours do not cause more than average pollution. We believe that transport is an important aspect of sustainable tourism, and we do our best to decrease the average pollution level.

We commit to this by;

- Considering and giving preference to more sustainable alternatives when selecting transport options for transfers and excursions in the destination, taking into account price, comfort, and practical considerations;
- Transport providers are provided with codes of conduct and guidance regarding sustainable driving techniques;

## 5. Accommodations

We try to achieve a tourism supply chain that is fully sustainable. The partner accommodations play an important role in achieving this, and are stimulated and motivated to adopt sustainable practices.

We commit to this by;

- Giving clear preference to accommodations that work with internationally acknowledged (e.g. GSTC recognised) and/or Travelife certification; and selecting accommodations that comply with sustainability and quality standards with a special focus on the following items : *Water saving program - Waste management program - Energy saving program - Energy reduction system - Child protection policy – Trainings to employees in Health & Safety - Sustainable supply chain - CSR activities.*
- Motivating and encouraging partner accommodations to become sustainably certified;
- Preference and selecting accommodations that are locally owned and managed;
- Encouraging accommodations to fill in the sustainability self assessment to gain insight in their practices;
- Clearly and actively communicating our sustainability objectives and requirements regarding accommodations to contracted and other relevant accommodations;
- Offering incentives to accommodations that are actively engaging in sustainability;
- Ensuring that through our accommodation supply chain, the rights of children are respected and safeguarded by having a sustainability contract in place that requests accommodation to comply with :
  - A zero tolerance policy of sexual exploitation of children;
  - Having a clause dedicated to this aspect in their contract that enables the travel company to end the contractual agreement prematurely if the accommodation supplier does not take adequate measures to prevent sexual exploitation of children;
  - Training employees in children’s rights, the prevention of sexual exploitation and how to report suspected cases;
- Working with accommodations and restaurants that incorporate elements of local art, architecture, or cultural heritage; while respecting the intellectual property rights of local communities;
- Contracted accommodations are expected to limit their negative impact on local and global biodiversity, wherever feasible (e.g. not to offer red-listed species on the menu or advise on illegal souvenirs).
- Terminating cooperation with accommodation in case of clear evidence that contracted accommodations jeopardize the provision of integrity of basic services such as food, water, energy, healthcare, or soil to the neighbouring companies.;

## 6. Excursions and activities

We value animal and community welfare extremely highly and aim that tours leave little to no footprint. We are safeguarding the authenticity of the communities and the natural environment, and are strongly against harming wildlife and polluting the environment.

We commit to this by;

- Advising guests on behaviour standards during excursions and activities with a focus on respecting the local culture, nature, and environment;
- Communicating our sustainability objectives and requirements to contracted and other relevant excursion providers by distributing this information via code of conducts, representative agents, social media, email, discussions, and/or meetings, to minimise negative visitor impact and maximise enjoyment;
- Not offering any excursions that harm humans, animals, plants, natural resources such as water and energy, or which are socially and culturally unacceptable;
- Not offering any excursions in which wildlife is held captive, except for properly regulated activities in compliance with local, national, and international law;
- Not being involved with companies that harvest, consume, display, sell, or trade wildlife species unless it is part of a regulated activity that ensures that their utilisation is sustainable and in compliance with local, national, and international law;

## **7. Tour leaders, local representatives and guides**

We aim at involving as many locals as possible by employing them in the tourism business. We stand for a fair and safe working environment that supports and respects local communities.

We commit to this by;

- Preferring to work with local tour leaders, local representatives, local tour guides, porters, drivers, cooks, and other local staff in case of equal ability, and provide training as required;
- Ensuring that tour leaders, representatives, guides and other locally active staff, contracted by us, understand the terms and conditions of their employment, including remuneration.
- Paying tour leaders, local representatives, guides, porters and other local staff contracted by us at least a living wage that is equal to or above the legal minimum or relevant industry standard;
- Ensuring that our tour guides, hosts, and other employees under contract are qualified and trained regularly;
- Ensuring that our local guides are informed on relevant aspects of our sustainability policy and comply with it, by newsletters, references or supplements to contracts, emails, or training and information sessions;
- Ensuring that the trekking staff has the appropriate clothing and other equipment related for the excursions as listed in the Trekking Guideline prescribed by Tourism Council Bhutan (TCB) and ensure the national standard on trekking weight;
- Having our tour leaders, local representatives and guides inform clients on relevant sustainability matters in the destination (e.g. protection of flora, fauna, and cultural heritage, resource use), social norms and values (e.g. tips, dressing code and photography) and human rights (e.g. sexual exploitation);
- Training our employed tour leaders and local representatives on the avoidance of sexual exploitation of children. This will include training on how to check the requirements concerning exclusion of child abuse;

## **8. Destination**

We aim to maximize positive impacts and minimize negative impacts at destination to ensure the sustainable development of the places that we operate in.

We commit to this by:

- Considering sustainability aspects in the selection process of new destinations and offering alternative, non-mainstream destinations where necessary;
- Not selecting destinations in which tourism leads to negative structural, local effects, (unless the company's involvement results in clear counter balancing effects);
- Comply with legally based spatial planning, protected areas and heritage regulations. Also with destination management strategies of local, regional and national authorities;
- Not promote souvenirs which contain threatened flora and fauna species as indicated in the CITES treaty and the IUCN 'Red List'; or historic and archaeological artefacts indicated in the Tourism Rules & Regulations 2017 of Bhutan; and Penal Code 2016 Section 24 (except as permitted by law);

## **9. Customer communication and protection**

Customer welfare and information are very important to us. All ABTO members ensure clear and constant communication and high protection to our clients.

Prior to booking, we commit to this by:

- Ensure that customer privacy is not compromised;
- Comply with relevant standards and voluntary codes of conduct in marketing and advertising messages, and not promise more than is delivered;
- Make product and price information clear, complete and accurate, with regard to the company and its products and services, including sustainability claims;
- Provide destination information, including sustainability aspects, which is factually correct, balanced and complete;
- Clearly inform (potential) direct customers, about sustainability commitments and actions;

After booking and during holidays, we commit to this by:

- Provide Information to consumers about the natural surroundings, local culture and cultural heritage in the holiday destination;
- Inform consumers about key sustainability aspects and issues in the destination and receive recommendations on how to make a positive contribution;
- Inform customers about risks and precautions related to health and safety matters in the destination;
- Keep a contact person and a telephone number permanently available for emergency situations;
- Train personnel and keep guidelines available, on how to deal with emergency situations;
- Provide clients with documented guidelines and/or codes of conduct for sensitive excursions and activities, to minimize negative visitor impact and maximize enjoyment. When possible, guidelines are developed in collaboration with relevant NGO's and the affected community;

- Inform clients about applicable legislation concerning the purchasing, sales, import and export of historic or religious artefacts and articles containing materials of threatened flora and/or fauna in the destination as ensured by Tourism Rules & Regulations 2017;
- Motivate clients to use local restaurants and shops (where appropriate);
- Inform clients on sustainable transport options in destinations, when feasible;
- Encourage clients to donate to local charity and sustainable initiatives;

After holidays, we commit to this by:

- Measure systematically client satisfaction and take into account the results, for service and product improvements;
- Have clear procedures in handling complaints from clients;