

ELEVATE SUSTAINABILITY WORKING GROUP

2024 REPORT

BY ELEVATE DESTINATIONS





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Insights

Over the course of the year, the Elevate Sustainability Working Group (ESWG) created a framework that would improve our communications and collaborations with our on-the-ground partners and thus, improve our efforts toward sustainable operations. Starting with a cohort of 14 of Elevate's closest and most consistently utilized ground partners and utilizing a self-assessment process, Elevate received comprehensive responses from representatives of each company.

There were several key insights that emerged from the information they shared:

- **100%** of our partners prioritize sourcing their goods and services from local and fair-trade vendors;
- **79%** already support (financial or in-kind) biodiversity conservation in their main area of operations;
- **Only 29%** of our partners are assessing risks to water in the main destination areas;
- Improving best practices for collaboration with indigenous communities is among one of the greatest opportunities for us and our suppliers to focus on in 2025;
- **8 of the 14 partners** assessed are already well aligned with our sustainability priorities, and have demonstrated the policies and programs that lead their efforts;
- **2 of the 14 partners** show great potential for improving their sustainability practices in the coming 2-5 years with the goals that they have put in place.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conclusions

The year-long ESWG process created a framework for improving communications and collaboration with Elevate's suppliers, and produced several insights and success stories that Elevate can share with its industry peers, clients, the media, and wider audiences. In addition to this usable framework, Elevate also defined its sustainability point of view and priorities, which will steer future strategic decision making about the company's operations.

Recommendations

1. **Share Elevate's sustainability point of view and priorities with each new employee** (and/or prospects)
2. **Share a copy of Elevate's sustainability point of view and priorities with each of our ground partners** (including any new ones we begin working with)
3. **Share findings and insights from this report into Elevate communications materials** (newsletters, social media, in-person reports to our industry network, etc.)
4. **Maintain the ESWG and coordinate quarterly and annual goals** for continued sustainability improvements
5. **Repeat the Partner Self-Assessment process each year** and roll it out to a second cohort of partners





INTRODUCTION

In late 2023, Elevate Destinations conducted an internal, team-wide audit to assess how the company is performing as a leader in sustainable tourism.

A critical opportunity to strengthen the company's sustainability strategy was identified, and in January 2024, the Elevate Sustainability Working Group (ESWG) was established. The ESWG consists of seven team members across all roles and levels of seniority within the company, reflecting a diverse set of viewpoints and ideas.

The Elevate team always knew how important their relationship to their on-the-ground operations partners is. However, there was not yet a framework for Elevate to formally collaborate with its partners to improve their joint sustainability efforts.

In order to create this framework, we tasked the Elevate Sustainability Working Group with the following phases of work:

1. **Define our strategic, sustainability point-of-view.** What matters most to us as a company, and what efforts best reflect the story of our brand?
2. Based on our point-of-view, **identify our sustainability priorities** across both environmental and socioeconomic concerns
3. **Communicate our sustainability priorities to our ground partners,** and ask them to self-assess where their operations align with our ethos.

INTRODUCTION

Significance

In 2023, Elevate’s leadership team was looking for a way to advance the company’s efforts toward social and environmental sustainability as a tourism company. Already a frontrunner of the industry, having won multiple awards and recognition for programs that create equitable opportunities for destination communities, Elevate had a strong foundation for sustainability. The first step would be to reflect on the company’s operations to date.

In late 2023, we began an internal audit process to determine what Elevate was already doing well and what could be improved upon. Using the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria, we tracked how much Elevate was in alignment with each of the criteria points. Our findings demonstrated that there were three main ways in which Elevate could improve on sustainability:

1. **Improve knowledge of our ground partners’ sustainability policies** and practices, and move our operations closer in partnership to those who have good practices in place;
2. **Document more of what we are already doing** so we can measure and manage it;
3. **Communicate what we are doing and are planning to do** (goals) to our audience and stakeholders.

These findings led to our 2024 year-long project of establishing the Elevate Sustainability Working Group (ESWG), defining our sustainability priorities, and improving our sustainability collaborations with our ground partners.

Now, having completed this project and with the findings it has brought, we have a broad range of data points and relevant insights that serve as a conversation starter with our partners to deepen our shared sustainability work, inform our team of our current progress, and share with our stakeholders in a spirit of transparency, accountability, and celebrating our sustainability wins thus far.

Note: the full set of data points can be found on the Elevate Suppliers Assessment Data spreadsheet, available upon request.





METHODOLOGY

Timeline

Sept - Dec 2023: developed an internal audit of Elevate’s sustainability policies and practices, utilizing the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria as a basis. Elevate’s team was invited to participate in the audit, providing important insights as to what we are currently doing or not doing on a day-to-day level.

January - Feb 2024: planned the 2024 project, which included the establishment of the ESG and designing the three phases outlined in the introduction (defining our sustainability point of view, defining our sustainability priorities, communicating our priorities to our partners and inviting them to self-assess their current practices)

March 2024: ESG team convened for the first time, where we discussed Elevate’s brand story and how that leads to discovering our unique point-of-view about sustainability. Since every company cannot do it all, it was

important for us to dial in on what we could do and what mattered most to us. Our point of view became:

We believe that enriching local communities while bridging cultures (between travelers and locals) leads to the best outcomes for the planet and all who inhabit it.

April 2024: The ESG team drilled into the detailed work of establishing our sustainability priorities. Dividing into two teams, one to look at social responsibility criteria and the other to look at environmental responsibility criteria, each group drafted a list of suggested criteria (based on the GSTC) that would lead our sustainability priorities. Once drafted, the other group had a chance to review and provide feedback, and then we finalized each list and combined them to create one set of priorities.

METHODOLOGY

May 2024: The Partner Self-Assessment form was created, along with a set of documents to help the ESGW communicate the assessment process to our partners.

June 2024: A list of initial partners to reach out to was drafted, and this became our first cohort to recruit for the assessment process.

June - Oct 2024: Outreach to each partner on the list for Cohort 1. All of the 14 partners initially selected for the first cohort successfully participated in the assessment process.

Nov - Dec 2024: All of the completed assessments were analyzed and data was synthesized into a set of findings and insights, compiled onto a [comprehensive data sheet](#) and later summarized in this report.

Limitations and Constraints

Depending on the exact number of partners that Elevate likely works with on an annual basis, 14 may be too small of a sample size to give us a clear picture of how our partners currently align with our sustainability priorities. It's also important to note that certain regions have certain infrastructure constraints that make it difficult or impossible for them to implement various practices in reality. Many partners are doing their best to work around impractical situations, often operating in areas

with poor governance, poor regulation and/or little oversight and enforcement of some of the most basic policies that would enable sustainable tourism in the destination.

Sample Size and Technique

14 total respondents

Destinations covered:

- Morocco
- Rwanda / East Africa
- Tanzania
- Nepal / Himalayan region
- Chile
- India
- Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia)
- Colombia
- Ecuador
- Kenya
- Argentina
- New Zealand
- Global

The Partner Self-Assessment form consisted of Elevate's Sustainability Priorities criteria, broken down into several different question types. Depending on the question, respondents were prompted to answer Yes/No, multiple choice, check all that apply, or in paragraph form. For any Yes/No question, they were invited to further elaborate on their response.



FINDINGS

Key Findings

- **100%** of our partners prioritize sourcing their goods and services from local and fair-trade vendors;
- **79%** already support (financial or in-kind) biodiversity conservation in their main area of operations;
- **Only 29%** of our partners are assessing risks to water in the main destination areas;
- Improving best practices for collaboration with indigenous communities is among one of the greatest opportunities for us and our suppliers to focus on in 2025;
- **8 of the 14 partners** assessed are already well aligned with our sustainability priorities, and have demonstrated the policies and programs that lead their efforts;
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FINDINGS

Implications

- Since enriching local communities and bridging cultures is an important part of Elevate's point of view on sustainability, **it's good to see that 100% of our responding partners prioritize trade with local vendors;**
- Elevate Destinations places a critical lens on conservation across culture, nature, and wildlife. With nearly 80% of our partners actively contributing to conservation efforts in their area of operations, this shows that their ethos aligns well with ours. **For those who aren't yet supporting biodiversity conservation, we should find out why.**
- The most alarming finding was that **only 28% of our respondents are currently assessing the risks to water** in the areas where they are operating.
- We received **vague responses from every respondent about communicating and collaborating with indigenous communities.** Given Elevate's focus on uplifting communities, this should be a focus of our conversations with our suppliers in 2025.
- While more than half of the respondents demonstrated that they are well aligned with our sustainability priorities, that leaves six with whom **we'll want to ask deeper questions and see how we can close the gap**—either with collaborative action or if necessary, finding alternate suppliers.



Conclusion and Next Steps

In conclusion, here are all of the recommended actions and next steps that Elevate should take to move this effort forward from research to implementation:

1. **Share Elevate's sustainability point of view and priorities with each new employee** (and/or prospects)
2. **Share a copy of Elevate's sustainability point of view and priorities with each of our ground partners** (including any new ones we begin working with)
3. **Share findings and insights from this report into Elevate communications materials** (newsletters, social media, in-person reports to our industry network, etc.)
4. **Maintain the ESWG and coordinate quarterly and annual goals** for continued sustainability improvements
5. **Repeat the Partner Self-Assessment process each year** and roll it out to a second cohort of partners
6. **Follow up with Cohort 1 on their projected goals, as well as to close any gaps** in where their operations currently fail to match our sustainability priorities.



CELEBRATING OUR SHARED WINS

“We support organizations like Dhonk Craft in Ranthambore and Pashoo Pakshee in Central India—which are dedicated to preserving traditional crafts and promoting rehabilitation and sustainable livelihoods for local communities in the periphery of wildlife sanctuaries.”

- TRAVEL SCOPE INDIA

“More than 95% of our employees in each destination where we operate are locals, and 90% of our key management roles are held by local women to promote gender equality and empower women in their communities.”

- EASIA

“We have invested heavily in solar and now produce approximately 75% of our camps’ power from solar, up from 62% 2 years ago. This means that we are still relying on generators as a back-up, and we intend to lower our energy consumption from the gensets and get to zero generator hours.”

- ASILIA AFRICA

“We promote the preservation of the Chagra culture. We are one of the last Haciendas that does El Rodeo, a cultural expression of the Chagra culture. We are part of the Sustainable committee of the Cotopaxi National Park.”

- TIERRA DEL VOLCAN

“BirdsChile gives away 600 hours of volunteer work annually for training local entrepreneurs and supporting local initiatives for cultural and natural preservation.”

- BIRDSCHILE

“We are one of the few organizations promoting women in guiding positions. All of our camp management is local Tanzanians that have worked their way through our organization.”

- WILDERNESS DESTINATIONS

“Water is filtered at Cannúa and all water leaves cleaner than when it entered. We run almost entirely off of rain water. At True Colombia we try to 100% avoid plastic use, and in cities where tap water is potable, we encourage bottle refills.”

- TRUE COLOMBIA

