

ECOTOURISM GOVERNANCE AND CLIMATE ACTION IN MEDITERRANEAN REGIONS

a joint session of the IMC Sustainable Cultural & Maritime Tourism Task Force meeting
and the NaTour4CChange project 2nd regional exchange workshop

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Sant Fruitós del Bages (Barcelona)



A side event in the frame of the Global Ecotourism Forum

MINUTES

Ecotourism governance and climate action in the Mediterranean regions, a joint session of the IMC Sustainable Cultural & Maritime Tourism Task Force meeting and the Natour4CChange project 2nd regional exchange workshop.

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Setting the Scene for Sustainable Tourism - Anna Estella

Anna Estella, Deputy Director of Environmental Education at Nature and Society (Catalunya), sets a clear compass for the Forum: sustainable tourism, particularly ecotourism, must safeguard natural systems while enhancing visitor well-being and local livelihoods. She acknowledges the mounting pressures in Catalunya from climate change, overtourism, and gaps in regulation, noting the spike in unregulated visitation to sensitive natural areas. Catalunya's response positions its 14 natural parks and the Natura 2000 network as "living laboratories," where recreation is intentionally paired with ecosystem regeneration under participatory governance such as the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism. The objective is not short-term crowd control, but long-term conservation of species, ecosystems, and socio-economic benefits. Estella emphasizes the transferability of this approach across Europe, calling for "Mediterranean diplomacy" and interregional collaboration to harmonize governance and accelerate shared learning for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Building a Shared Vision: Environment and Tourism Hand in Hand - Xavier Font

Xavier Font, Deputy Director for Territorial Tourism Development in Catalunya, argues that ecotourism cannot be planned in isolation: environmental stewardship and tourism policy must be integrated under a single vision of territorial excellence. "Better places to live are better places to visit," he says, underscoring that protected, well-managed landscapes are the bedrock of a high-quality visitor experience and community well-being. Font emphasizes that protected areas must remain under competent public management and highlighted longstanding cooperation between Catalunya's General Directorates of Environmental Policies and Tourism. The Ecotourism Board of Catalunya, created a decade ago, is presented as a practical vehicle for shared decision-making between public and private actors, grounded in the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism. Font casts the Global Event Forum as a milestone to strengthen governance frameworks across the Mediterranean and urged EU institutions to embed ecotourism in European strategies so nature and tourism advance together across environmental, social, and economic pillars.

Relaunching the Mediterranean Ecotourism Consortium (MEC)

This session, moderated by Jordi Juarez, focuses on the relaunch of the MEC, whose roots lie in successive Interreg MED projects, including DestiMED PLUS and earlier ENI CBC Med and Interact MED initiatives. The Consortium's four objectives are to: (1) promote public policies that support ecotourism; (2) strengthen multilevel governance across Mediterranean territories; (3) facilitate exchange of best practices; and (4) elevate the visibility of the MEET model at regional, national, and EU levels. The MEET methodology, central to MEC's mission, aligns ecotourism development with climate adaptation and mitigation, ensuring environmental integrity alongside market viability. With Europe defining a new tourism strategy, speakers argue that a reinvigorated MEC can give Mediterranean regions a stronger collective voice in shaping sustainable tourism governance.

The MEET Methodology: A Shared Model for Mediterranean Ecotourism

Arnau Teixidor (IUCN Med) outlines a decade of MEET's evolution. The initial phase emphasized planning and product development rooted in place-based storytelling. A second phase established management standards, monitoring tools, and evidence-based definitions of what counts as ecotourism. Since 2020, the focus has expanded to policy engagement, governance strengthening, and market access pathways.

At its core, the MEET model creates a shared vision for ecotourism in Mediterranean Protected Areas; defines enabling conditions through standards; integrates footprint assessments and evidence-based tools (including socioeconomic studies, life-cycle assessment, and community engagement analysis); and requires inclusive governance that spans protected area authorities, tourism operators, and local stakeholders. Teixidor highlights outcomes such as market access through collaboration with Intrepid Travel for products in Croatia, Albania, and Greece that retain local operation, and the establishment of a destination management organization at Lebanon's Shouf Biosphere Reserve inspired by La Garrotxa (Catalunya). The initiative has also produced a 2022 collection of good practices, guidance on ecotourism and DMO engagement, online training via the IUCN Academy, and an impact monitoring platform (currently inactive). Next steps include revitalizing the MEET Network, deepening market linkages, welcoming new actors, and securing stronger recognition of ecotourism within European governance as a pillar of climate resilience and regional development.

Strengthening Governance: MEC's Policy Roadmap and Implementation - Flora Leroy

Flora Leroy (CPMR Intermediterranean) presents the MEC's terms of reference, policy roadmap, and implementation plan, designed to close a Mediterranean-scale governance gap that currently leaves tourism–conservation integration to fragmented efforts. Embedded within the CPMR Intermediterranean Task Force on Sustainable Tourism, the MEC convenes regional authorities in tourism and environmental portfolios, protected area managers, NGOs, tourism associations, and local actors via the MEET Network. Current members include the Institute for Tourism of Croatia, the Region of Crete, the Balearic Islands, the South Aegean, and others, joined under a Memorandum of Understanding.

The roadmap organizes action under three axes:

- **Governance:** short-term consolidation of Local Ecotourism Clusters (LECs), medium-term establishment of a regional governance framework, and long-term creation of a Mediterranean Ecotourism Management Plan aligned with EU strategies.
- **Data management and monitoring:** develop ecotourism indicators, harmonize monitoring, and deploy smart tools leveraging big data, AI, and impact assessment.

- **Networking and advocacy:** build a shared vision, create alliances for joint advocacy, and mobilize EU project pipelines and funding.

Implementation will capitalize on ongoing projects: REBOOT MED (product development), the Blue Tourism Initiative (marine/coastal), REGENERA4MED (regenerative tourism), and NaTour4CChange (climate tools), and contribute to broader policy advocacy on the EU Nature Restoration Law and to data monitoring (vulnerability maps, coastal impacts). Priority next steps include scaling MEET model, tightening coordination between tourism and conservation departments, embedding regenerative tourism and Nature-based Solutions (NbS) in EU agendas, aligning indicators with the EU Tourism Dashboard, expanding training (IUCN Academy), recruiting new members, and consolidating MEC's multilevel governance role.

Regional Experience: Linking Conservation and Tourism in the South Aegean

Irini Barianaki presented the DestiMED PLUS pilot in North Karpathos–Saria (Natura 2000). Through a Local Ecotourism Cluster that united guides, hoteliers, fishermen, cultural associations, and municipalities, the region developed the **Karpathos–Saria Ecotourism Experience** featuring hiking and nature observation, snorkeling training at Palatia Bay (led by the Marine Protected Area authority, MADPA), and cultural gastronomy experiences. Testing phases included ecological footprint assessment and social indicators such as employment impact. Governance matured from a Regional Ecotourism Committee (REC) to a “super REC” in cooperation with Crete, curbing fragmentation and strengthening bottom-up participation. The pilot advanced to a regional ecotourism strategy and action plan; the package remains operational, strengthening Karpathos's eco-destination identity and building momentum to replicate the MEET model on Kassos. Challenges include limited funding and national reforms centralizing protected area management, which add bureaucratic complexity at regional level.

Q&A: Paving the Path for the Future of the MEC

Participants raised governance and inclusiveness issues. Andalusia noted its Regional Coordination Unit excludes environmental authorities, undermining policy integration. Questions surfaced about including southern Mediterranean partners (Tunisia, Turkey). Flora Leroy explained that MEET has engaged southern shore partners via REBOOT MED project and invited them into MEC activities, aligned with WestMED recommendations. The absence of a cross-Mediterranean tourism body, unlike fisheries or environment, was cited as a compelling rationale for the MEC. From Romania, questions addressed openness to micro-regions and municipalities and the need for synergies across networks; membership to the MEC is open but expansion depends on project resources, with MEET providing capacity-building tools for local actors. Participants also noted the lack of formal EU recognition of “ecotourism”; a bottom-up alliance of destinations could advocate for recognition and funding within the forthcoming EU strategy. Emerging priorities include intersectoral governance across tourism, environment, and climate; inclusivity for EU and non-EU Mediterranean partners; addressing the Mediterranean-scale governance gap; networking micro-regions and destinations; and EU-level advocacy for ecotourism.

Taking Climate Action Through Nature-Based Solutions: Transnational Exchange (NaTour4CChange)

The second **NaTour4CChange** Transnational Exchange Workshop oriented regions toward shared methodologies that combine adaptation and mitigation, and toward cooperative governance. Regions included Andalusia, Zadar County, Sardinia, Crete, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with pilots in Cabo de Gata Natural Park, MPA Capo Carbonara, Dugi Otok, Nature Park Hutovo Blato, and Ori Zarkou & Koufonisi Island. Regional authorities are embedding measures into formal plans; destination pilots are testing NbS

in protected areas and islands, prioritizing mitigation to reduce ecological footprints. The session aligned activities and prepared the ground for next milestones.

Country and Regional Spotlights

Croatia's Integrated Approach: Climate Action in Tourism Policy

Jelena Šobat described a systemic integration of climate action into the **Tourism Strategy 2030** and national tourism law. All DMOs must prepare climate-integrated action plans anchored in 17 obligatory sustainability indicators spanning economic, environmental, and social dimensions, supported by guidelines and templates. A new digital platform will merge national tourism statistics with resource-use data (water, energy) and primary research to allow comparability and monitoring across roughly 300 destinations. Every DMO must complete a Destination Management Plan (DMP) by year's end; only projects designated in DMPs will be eligible for co-financing. Overtouristed destinations must conduct carrying capacity studies. A local eco-tax, earmarked for nature restoration, will help finance NbS, critical given that half of Croatia's territory and 40% of its Adriatic waters are protected. Short-term outcomes include a robust baseline and improved performance monitoring; long-term, the goal is mainstreaming climate resilience and sustainability across the sector.

NaTour4CChange: Connecting Regions and Destinations

Izidora Marković Vukadin reported significant progress: five regional strategies completed, and six to seven destination action plans underway, all supported by a methodological package (best practices, assessment tool, toolkit). Regional strategies span adaptation and mitigation; destination plans lean toward adaptation. Each pilot destination will design-and where feasible implement-at least one NbS to generate practical evidence for replication. The work dovetails with Croatia's national framework and methodologies developed by the Institute for Tourism.

Andalusia: Bringing Climate Action into Tourism Policy

José Francisco Benítez described a rapid evolution: climate considerations, absent two years ago, are now integrated into tourism policy. The region is developing indicators to track climate impacts and adaptation needs and has committed **€29 million** in subsidies for SMEs to deploy renewable energy and water-saving technologies, key levers for decarbonization and resilience.

Zadar County: Climate-Resilient Tourism Strategy

Grounded in a climate risk assessment supported by national and IPCC-aligned data, Izidora Marković Vukadin outlined that Zadar's strategy blends decarbonization and adaptation with enabling conditions. **Twenty-two actions** range from establishing energy and emissions baselines and piloting NbS to investing in resilient infrastructure and expanding education and awareness, seen as essential for long-term behavioral change. The plan reflects multi-level collaboration and EU policy alignment. While sectoral tourism strategies are voluntary in Croatia, Zadar is pioneering integration, with intent to fold selected actions into the county's general climate strategy.

Sardinia: Bridging Climate and Tourism Strategies

Facing intense pressure in narrow coastal zones, Luisa Mulas explained that Sardinia used NaTour4CChange to connect its Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, the **Sardinia 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy**, and its Tourism Strategy. A regional unit now links environment and tourism with planning and climate departments to build shared language, ambition, and the regulatory and financial

choices needed to embed climate priorities. Local pilots include the **Tavolara Marine Protected Area**, where results are expected to be especially impactful.

Neretva Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina): Laying the Groundwork

Starting from a limited policy baseline, Sabina Galic presented that Neretva Canton is designing a regional climate action strategy for tourism that analyzes the sector through a climate lens, aligns with national and regional policies, and engages public, private, community, and academic stakeholders. Key challenges include limited technical expertise, fragmented governance, and financing gaps, as well as missing indicators and data systems. Next steps focus on capacity building, stronger governance at regional and municipal levels, integration into broader development plans, and a foundation for long-term multilevel governance.

Crete: Advancing Climate Action Through Collaboration

Kyriaki Theodrou described how Crete created a **Regional Coordination Unit** uniting Development, Tourism, Civil Protection, and Environment departments to deliver a **Climate Action Plan for Tourism**. Vulnerability analysis prioritizes rising temperatures (and invasive species risk), water scarcity and desertification, and coastal erosion, especially along the northern shoreline. The plan's priorities include coastal and environmental protection, water and energy efficiency, improved thermal comfort, diversification of the tourism model, and safeguarding cultural heritage. Clear roles, indicators, transparency, and regular reporting are central. The plan awaits Regional Council approval; next steps include finalizing climate data, preparing a financing plan, and potentially creating a multi-stakeholder tourism platform modeled on an existing regional innovation platform.

Q&A: How Regions Identified Priorities

Regions converged on scientific evidence as the basis for setting priorities, albeit through different pathways: Andalusia leveraged a 2019 climate plan with tourism scenarios; Zadar combined risk and resilience into a decision matrix; Sardinia relied on projections to 2050 to identify risks like coastal erosion and heat waves; and Crete used vulnerability mapping and national datasets across multiple RCP pathways. In every case, the aim was to align adaptation and mitigation with broader climate policy while tailoring measures to local vulnerabilities and capacities.

Q&A: Stakeholder Engagement - Challenges and Trade-Offs

Engagement within public administrations proved comparatively smooth; extending participation to the private sector and sustaining political commitment was harder. Andalusia's informal cooperation between Tourism and Environment evolved into a formal MoU; Zadar benefited from strong ties with Natura Jadera, the DMO, and the University of Zadar but faced hurdles in securing county-level leadership; Sardinia focused effort at the political level, culminating in a board resolution that formalized collaboration; and Crete found that bilateral, face-to-face meetings, while time-consuming, were the most effective for engaging tourism stakeholders. Common trade-offs included time versus effectiveness, technical consensus versus political buy-in, and informal trust-building versus the need to institutionalize cooperation.

Q&A: Feasibility of Implementation and Missing Resources

Shared constraints crystallized across regions. **Indicators and data** remain challenging to define and harmonize. **Funding** is a persistent barrier. **Governance and synergies** require stronger interdepartmental and interregional coordination to avoid duplication (particularly on indicator frameworks). **Awareness and political will** need strengthening, as public urgency still lags expert consensus. **Integration and innovation**,

aligning with coastal and spatial planning and embedding NbS, are critical to move from plan to practice. Immediate tasks include agreeing indicators at the outset (Andalusia), securing sustained government support and embedding NbS into spatial planning (Zadar), ensuring realistic, actionable measures and aligning sectoral strategies (Sardinia), and addressing data gaps and financing while integrating innovation tools (Crete).

South Aegean: Innovating Governance for Climate-Resilient Tourism

Returning to the South Aegean, Barianaki described a multi-island region with 48 inhabited islands and 32 municipalities, each with distinct tourism profiles and climate exposures. Prioritization criteria included hazard exposure (wildfires, erosion, volcanic activity, earthquakes), environmental values, tourism intensity and seasonality, and local capacity/readiness. The region has finalized its **Climate Adaptation Plan** and launched the “**Co-Lab Sustainable Destination**” in Rhodes, convening businesses, municipalities, international partners, and civil society around waste, energy, mobility, and water solutions. Institutional reforms created new directorates and units, Sustainable Development and Innovation, Capacity Monitoring, Sustainable Tourism, Environmental Sustainability/Innovation/Data, Civil Protection and Climate Crisis, and a Regional Data Centre to underpin evidence-based policy. These changes address long-standing data and coordination barriers while leveraging EU-funded project opportunities.

Catalonia: From Climate Commitments to Practical Tools

Mariona Salvatella showcased Catalonia’s **Climate Action Plan 2023–2027** for tourism under the Glasgow Declaration. An early deliverable is a **free event carbon-footprint calculator**, offering quantified emissions, compensation options, and practical guidance; more than 100 stakeholders have been trained, and translations into Spanish and English are underway. Persistent challenges include stakeholder engagement, data gaps, and mobility, still a major driver of emissions. The **LIFE TOUR4CLIMA** project (launched September 2023) aims to strengthen governance and the tourism–climate nexus, with strong synergies to NaTour4CChange.

Valencia: Climate Action in an Urban Tourism Hub

Jaume Mata outlined an urban model bounded by beaches, natural parks, and agricultural landscapes. Despite early risk assessments ranking floods as low risk, the metropolitan area experienced catastrophic flooding in 2022, an instructive reminder that strategies must anticipate the unexpected. Valencia’s **Climate Mission 2030** (one of Europe’s 100 climate-neutral cities) builds on a **38% carbon reduction (2007–2022)** and the European Green Capital award. The city uses ISO methodologies to calculate carbon and water footprints and drives sectoral engagement via the **Valencia Green Deal**, now signed by 150 tourism businesses. The strategy hinges on “seduction”: pairing feasibility and benefits with tools, financing, diagnostics, and savings reports. Funding remains tight, but aligning climate action with branding and cost reductions has catalyzed participation.

Peer Exchange: Transferability and New Ideas

At the World Café, participants agreed that many governance tools and methods are transferable when adapted to context. Crete’s integrative coastal management tool and its linkage of demographic patterns with tourism features were singled out, alongside island-specific plans and focused stakeholder meetings to sustain engagement. Enablers include awareness campaigns, harmonized indicators, political commitment, and typologies tailored to insular geographies. If action were to start tomorrow, the first step would be securing funding.

New ideas included dedicating a tourism eco-tax to ecosystem restoration; encouraging large transport and food companies to finance conservation; reducing air travel subsidies in favor of more sustainable

mobility; and tightening water-use measures in tourism operations where scarcity is acute. The overarching message: tools travel best when supported by leadership, reliable data, and active stakeholders; innovative finance and regulatory levers can accelerate the shift from planning to implementation.

Coordinating Policies for Integrated Tourism: The EU Perspective

Marina Xenophontos (DG Environment) emphasized the Commission's role in mainstreaming environmental priorities across tourism while noting that real impact depends on member states transposing directives into national law. A **new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy** is in preparation, informed by 2025 consultations and building on the Transition Pathway for Tourism and the European Agenda for Tourism 2030. Ecotourism should be positioned at the center of this framework. To support delivery, DG ENVI is producing sectoral guidelines: existing guidance on fisheries and Natura 2000, and forthcoming guidance on climate change/adaptation in Natura 2000 and on tourism in Natura 2000—expected for adoption in mid-December 2025 following stakeholder consultation. Xenophontos highlighted the importance of smoothing seasonality (citing Scotland's 365-day model), and of better absorbing EU funds, not just Horizon Europe, but also the CAP for eco-, agro-, pesca-, and volunteer tourism. Governance depends on engaging the right stakeholders at each level; outcomes from this Forum could be shared with DG MOVE and other services to strengthen ecotourism's place in EU strategy. The moment is ripe, she concluded, for cross-DG cooperation, consistent national implementation, practical use of forthcoming Natura 2000 guidance, and enhanced capacity to absorb available funds.

Key Themes and Implications for Regional Development Agencies and Policymakers

From pilots to policy. Tested models (MEET, DestiMED) are maturing into formal structures (Ecotourism Boards, Regional Coordination Units, directorates) and policy roadmaps (like Mediterranean Ecotourism Consortium axes). Regions/Agencies should institutionalize these architectures to stabilize delivery beyond project cycles.

Governance as enabling infrastructure. Local Ecotourism Clusters, Regional Ecotourism Committees, Regional Coordination Units, and inter-departmental units can transform climate and conservation objectives into day-to-day tourism decisions. Formal instruments, MoUs, resolutions, management plans, can convert informal trust into durable mandates.

Data and indicators. Harmonized indicators and shared platforms are preconditions for accountability. Croatia's 17 mandatory indicators and national platform offer a replicable template; alignment with the [EU Tourism Dashboard](#) can unlock comparability and funding.

Nature-based solutions need spatial alignment. NbS must be embedded in Destination Management Plans and spatial/coastal plans to secure space, avoid conflicts, and scale co-benefits.

Finance that fits the transition. Regions can blend local revenue instruments (eco-taxes), SME support (renewables, water savings), and EU funds; leverage private market access while safeguarding standards through footprint assessment and evidence-based tools.

Engagement strategies that match stakeholders. Political buy-in (Sardinia), bilateral operator outreach (Crete), and citywide compacts (Valencia) show varied paths. The common denominator is clarity of roles, transparency, and steady communication across governance levels.

EU windows of opportunity. The forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Natura 2000 guidance provide near-term pathways to formalize ecotourism and secure financing. Networks like MEC and MEET can aggregate regional positions and feed structured recommendations into EU consultations.